

THE HAPPY ONES

In *Who Goes Home*, a Book Society Choice and an immediate bestseller, Maurice Edelman established a characteristic setting and situation—the backcloth of public events, a foreground of private problems. In *A Dream of Treason*, he again wrote of a man of affairs who is trapped simultaneously by a public and private dilemma. Both these novels were, however, concerned even more with external excitements than with the inner struggles of the central characters.

In *THE HAPPY ONES*, he breaks new ground. The tension all comes from within, despite the fact that it is framed in unforgettable scenes of high drama. In this story of Roger Metcalfe, the operator of an independent airline, his wife Laura and Stephen Russell, a successful barrister, each of the three main characters is a critic of society—Metcalfe because of his individualism, Laura because her dependence on her husband makes her acquiesce in intolerable situations, and Russell because his desire for public conformity is out of tune with his private inclinations.

This, as his readers have come to expect from Edelman, is a novel of suspense, but one in which the excitement derives less from the action—although that is vigorous and dramatic enough—than the inner anxieties which affect his characters. Is sexual infidelity ever justified? Is it necessarily destructive of marriage? He poses these central questions, and offers his own answers in a novel taking its title from the Villon ballade which says of love, “Happy are they who have nothing to do with it.”

By the same Author

A TRIAD OF LOVE

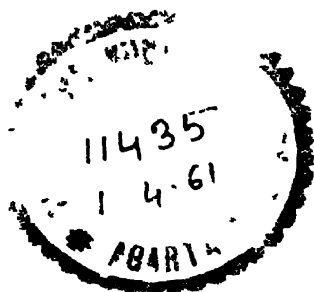
WHO GOES HOME

A DREAM OF TREASON

THE HAPPY ONES

by

MAURICE EDELMAN



LONDON
ALLAN WINGATE

*Folles amours font les gens bestes:
Bien est eueux qui riens n'y a . . .*

VILLON

Chapter One

BEYOND Madame Nodier's fat neck Russell was watching the curve of the hillside as it dropped down to the invisible sea, thinking that the lights were like sunlight on water, except that it was night, and wondering whether a thousand people were switching the electricity on and off or drawing curtains or darkening their window-panes as they passed behind them. Madame Nodier was the owner of the hotel and claimed a right to the whole attention of her companions, even though it was nearly half-past two and the waiters had begun to stack the tables in time to the tired meandering of the pianist. The stone dance-floor was empty. Here and there under the lime trees some of the guests at the fancy dress party still sat drinking—courteous brigands, thick-waisted Columbines, a few gypsies and two shy sisters in white gauze whom no one had previously spoken to in the hotel and who now sat between two unbuttoned hussars, laughing.

Apart from the English visitors who didn't wear fancy-dress—"The English on these occasions have no need of travesty," said Madame Nodier—everyone had put on some disguise. It was the custom of mid-July at Castelnau

les Fleur^{ts}; and Madame Nodier herself, festooned with silver chains and gold medallions, had sat for the whole evening sprawled in a heavy silk dress as a sign of participation.

"What are you?" Lord Huberton asked her with some reluctance. He was on his interrupted way from the village to the converted fortress on the hill above the hotel, and, still carrying his shopping-basket, had paused to greet Madame Nodier.

"Guess!" said Madame Nodier, heaving herself a little in the wicker chair.

"From your tattooing," said Huberton, "I'd say you're—a—woman mariner."

"No," said Madame Nodier, disappointed.

"An ancient Briton?"

"Really!"

"I give in."

"Well," said Madame Nodier, her fingers spread over her knees, "I'm a Sahara whore."

"Stupid of me," said Huberton. "Stupid!"

His annoyance with himself was sincere and he turned his light blue eyes and smooth face away, as if he'd failed to recognise a Tiepolo.

"Mind you" he said, "I was misled—you haven't got a chain on your ankle."

"I know," Madame Nodier admitted regretfully, looking down at her fleshy ankle puffed with mosquito bites, "I tried to get one, but couldn't."

"Try Mappin and Webb?" Huberton asked casually

"Oh, come," said Gisèle, Madame Nodier's niece, who was staying at Castelnau for the summer. She was dressed as a night-club cigarette-girl and her long brown legs were idly crossed. "You couldn't expect her to ask at

Mappin's for an ankle chain for a whore. What d'you think the assistant would say?"

"What would he say?" Huberton answered. "He'd say, 'Certainly, Madam. What size whore?'"

Madame Nodier laughed till her neck rippled.

"You're quite right, Christopher," she said to Huberton. "They'd never think it was for me. When the girls get my size, they go into the administration. You know," she said, turning to Gisèle, "before the pacification in Morocco—" her niece, who had heard this story many times, composed her face into an attitude of interest—"I was the only Frenchwoman in the Tiznit garrison—my first husband was the Colonel," she explained to Russell in passing. "For a hundred kilometres around..."

"She had a captain and two colonels shot from under her," said Huberton, scarcely moving his lips, like a prisoner at exercise. "She brought the General home to die—at the Royal—his family's hotel."

Russell looked up at the illuminated sign with its glowing calligraphy and crown that was a landmark in the hills from Toulon to Roches Fleuries, and Madame Nodier tapped with her ivory stick for his attention.

As she described her Moroccan experiences she kept her eyes fixed on a waiter who was struggling to fit two iron chairs into each other.

"Not like that," she said harshly, her expression transmuted from professional benevolence into malice. The waiter unlocked the two chairs with a clang and started again.

"I think I'll help him," said Huberton.

"No," said Madame Nodier, turning her face unsmilingly to Huberton. "I don't like you to help the waiters."

"Look me up, Stephen," said Huberton, flushing, to Russell. "I'm in the Martello tower—I've a charming circular flat with running water."

"All right," Russell answered. "Tomorrow. I'm leaving the day after."

"Pity," said Huberton, "I wanted you to meet the Metcalfes—they've just arrived—been staying at the Aurore at Cabasson—I'll see if I can get them to come tomorrow."

"Who're they?" Russell asked.

"Nightfreight," said Huberton, smiling. "He's my boss. Didn't you know? Nightfreight's the idol of charter aviation and I'm the jewel in its navel."

And then Russell remembered that Huberton had become a director of Nightfreight Ltd. after the first enquiry into the charges of overloading. As the insurance companies had consulted him, he had no wish to meet Metcalfe, who had himself piloted the second aircraft that crashed.

"Where's Medor?" Russell asked Huberton as he shook hands with those at the table, beginning with Madame Nodier, who paused in her eyebrow-directions to the waiters about glasses, chairs and lights to offer him her left hand:

"Where are you, Medor?" Huberton called into the shadows. In reply, a Boxer came shambling towards him, his shoulders hunched, a drool beneath his flews and a look of anxiety in his eyes.

"Take him away," said Gisèle. "I hate all dogs. They're like babies—they kill conversation. Take him away. He's licking my legs!"

"Come on, darling," said Huberton, offended, to Medor. The dog brightened up, and with swinging hips

slouched from the aura of light around the dance-floor into the shadowed gravel leading to the Tower. Huberton bowed and followed at an equivalent pace.

"Huberton!" said Madame Nodier, watching him go. "Look at him. He's a caricature of his dog."

"Oh, no," Russell said. "He's much more than that. He's a great collector. His Tiepolo drawings . . ."

"By the legs—the legs!" she called out in her shrill voice to a *chasseur* who was fumbling with a table. Everyone knew that when Madame Nodier arrived the party began; when she rose it was over. The sign would be put out, the piano would stop playing and the procession from her personal table would walk in dignity to the main entrance where a glowing floodlight illuminated the path down the terraces as far as the villa annex. She herself always remained till the ceremony of table-stacking was over. It was the signal to any who hoped to spend further hours in drink and talk that they would have to go elsewhere to do it.

"I've known Christopher Huberton a long time," Madame Nodier said. "Jean-Paul! Another six cognacs!... I knew his father—antiques and scrap—he bought the fortress and converted it. . . . Christopher put in the pump, and now takes all my water. . . . And how do you like Castelnau les Fleurs?"

Russell was about to tell her, but she went on, "You must return in the Spring, when all the mimosa is in blossom. All the way, all the way down to the sea—it's yellow with mimosa. . . . Then they come from Marseilles and tear it down. . . ."

Russell was waiting for her to finish so that Gisèle could go back to her room. Madame Nodier, who hated the sound of the sea because, as she said, it reminded her of

Mogador where her first husband died, lived at the back of the hotel. Gisèle's room was in the eastern corner at the front looking down towards the beach. When Madame Nodier was in bed, her niece would switch her light on so that Russell could return. But the old woman was relaxed amid the girring of the cicadas and gave no hint that she wanted to move.

"And when will your vacation be over?" she asked him.

"My holiday—the day after tomorrow," he answered, "but the vacation—the Michaelmas sittings don't begin till October."

"Ah, lawyers . . .," she said deprecatingly.

"Tell her your secret," said Gisèle.

"It's not a secret . . ." Russell began.

"In that case, I don't want to know," said Madame Nodier.

"It is a secret," said Gisèle. She had put on a small green straw hat that gave a special insolence to her bare thighs and her blond plait. "He's going to be a judge when he returns to England."

"Is that true?" asked Madame Nodier.

"Not quite," he replied. "I'm going to be a Recorder—that's a sort of judge—the chief legal officer of a borough with a court of quarter sessions, to be exact."

"And who appoints you to this office?" asked Madame Nodier, searchingly.

"Theoretically, the Queen. . . ."

"The Queen—that's very satisfactory. We are mostly royalists in France. . . . Jean-Paul, take away the glasses and bring a bottle of Heidsieck Dry Monopole. We must drink a toast to Mr. Russell. . . . Mrs. Metcalfe, please come and join us."

She called out to a white shape passing by the bushes and Russell rose to his feet.

"We are drinking the health of a judge—Mr. Stephen Russell. This is Madame Metcalfe."

"Good evening," she said. "I'm Laura Metcalfe."

"My name's Russell—Stephen Russell," he repeated, "and I apologise. Madame Nodier's exaggerating. I'm not a judge—I'm a Recorder—less, a prospective Recorder."

"The Dorian mood of flutes and soft recorders," she said, sitting next to him and laughing. Russell remembered then, hearing her voice, that he had seen her twice before in London, in January at the Royal Aeronautical Society's cocktail-party and at the International Aviation reception at Lancaster House in May.

"Not everyone can register culture as quickly as that," he said.

"No," she answered calmly, "lucky, wasn't it? . . . As a matter of fact, I needed a small revenge. Russell on Aviation Law has been my husband's bedside book for the last year."

"Do you . . .?" he began, but she was already talking to Madame Nodier.

"You must promise me, Stephen," said Gisèle in the slow, bantering voice much affected by French women of fashion and which she had picked up during the few months she was on the stage—"You must promise me that you will not sentence anyone to death. It is so barbarous. To strangle a man slowly and scientifically in the presence of a doctor to see that he dies—and of a priest to make sure that he goes to Heaven!"

"We've almost done away with it now" he said. "In any case, I propose to deal only with the lesser crimes—burglary, attempted rape, attempted sodomy, . . ."

"Stop!" said Madame Nodier. "It's a catalogue of frustration, and anyhow, the waiters speak English. . . . Everyone should learn 'Englis'! The English are the most fascinating people in the world. What courage in war! What discipline! What civic sense! What hypocrites!"

"That is fighting language," Russell said to Madame Nodier. "Why do you think that of us?"

"Oh, come," she said, waving her stick for the waiter to pour out the champagne. "Let's drink to the health of Mr. Stephen Russell—the judge."

He looked at her face, saw its expression of mocking malice and thought, as everyone drank, that she was right.

"I believe," said Madame Nodier, "That the British have a noble hypocrisy. You see, in the nursery, then at school, you have a code—a simple code of behaviour . . ."

"Like the law," Russell interposed.

"That's right," said Madame Nodier. "Like the law. Unwritten but established. When you sentence your accused to six months or six years you have the laws all ready made. It's black and it's white; it's right and it's wrong. The curious thing is that life isn't like that at all.

"I don't understand," he said.

"But you do, Madame Metcalfe?" the old woman replied. Laura Metcalfe smiled.

"The result is that as you get older—in everyone—there's a divorce between principles and behaviour."

"Would you think me ill-behaved, Aunt, if I went to bed?" Gisèle asked, stretching herself in an extremity of ennui.

"Yes," said Madame Nodier sharply. "You must wait. . . . The British, I was about to say, are the most puritanical of people—the most intolerant in their public

code and laws. It puts them to great private strain. Look how they beat their children!"

"More than the French?" Laura asked.

"Oh, much more. Our laws are strict; but we apply them laxly. It's a help to the nerves. Never mind. I love the British. . . . Be lenient!" she said, shaking her beringed finger at Russell. She tried to rise from her seat, but she had become adapted to its wicker convolutions. Gisèle held her elbow on one side, and Russell helped her on the other.

"Laura!" a voice, abrupt and precise, called from the darkness.

"Hello," said Laura, looking around. "Is that you, Roger? Coming!"

"Don't hurry," the voice called again. But the negative was a command to the contrary. "I'm going to the village. I'll see you in half an hour!"

"Good night," Russell said to Madame Nodier, taking her fat, gripless hand in his for a second.

"Be lenient," she repeated. "Be lenient, Mr. Russell!"

He laughed; she had become absorbed in some private thought, and couldn't abandon it.

"Good night, Gisèle," he said, taking her small, moist hand in his. She shook it, averting her eyes like a well-bred Parisian, and turned away, supporting her aunt beneath the armpit.

"May I take you back?" Russell asked Laura. "You *are* staying at the annexe?"

She hesitated and then she said: "Yes, I am. We couldn't get in at the hotel, and had to go to Cabasson. But we wanted to spend a few days here. . . . Have they stuck you in the annexe too?"

"Yes."

They began to walk down the zig-zag terrace path, lit on their way by the spot-light shining above the entrance to the hotel.

"How pretty Gisèle is!" Laura remarked suddenly. She was short-sighted and trod carefully on each step. "My husband was saying that once upon a time Madame Nodier must have looked just like her."

"It's a dreadful prospect," Russell replied, holding aside a pale green cactus that straggled in their way. Laura was walking in front of him, and as he looked at her neck and the dark hair at its nape he thought that she at least would never resemble Madame Nodier.

"Was that your husband who called to you?" he asked.

"Yes, it was," she answered. "You must have met him."

"I don't think so," he said. "I know of him, of course."

And then, realising his ineptitude, he added: "Anyone who's had anything to do with civil aviation knows your husband."

He heard her laugh, her face averted in the semi-darkness, and she said: "Do we go right or left here?"

"We can go either way. The right's flatter, but a little longer."

"Let's take the left," she said. "I don't want to keep Roger waiting." And then she added in her low voice: "I know all about you—of course."

"That's terrifying," he said. "It's almost like meeting a psychiatrist. Define 'all'."

"'All' in this context means 'a little'." She ran for two or three paces on the steep descent. "I know you're a barrister—I know the insurance companies used you for their enquiries when the two Nightcarriers crashed. . . ."

"That's all over now," he said abruptly. He was disinclined to discuss a professional matter with the wife of a man who had been involved in his clients' suspicions or, at any rate, doubts. And, just as a moment before, dawdling in order to prolong the walk, he had watched the movement of her shoulders in a vague regret and dissatisfaction with Gisèle, so now he wanted to reach the annexe quickly in order to return more speedily to the hotel.

"Don't be afraid, Mr. Russell," she commented without looking round. "I'm not going to discuss my husband's affairs. He looks after them very efficiently."

"Well, really—" Russell began.

"No, no," she said hurriedly. "Roger has only one problem at the moment—and that is to get his licence back."

"I was going to say," he went on, "that my hostile connection with your husband is over. The insurance company was satisfied and—well, you know all about that. With the Minister, I imagine, it's only a matter of time . . ."

"I don't know," she said.

They were already within sight of the annexe and she seemed to slow her step as if she wanted to talk.

"I don't know," she repeated. And then she stopped and turned, and for the first time that evening she looked Russell straight in the face. Her eyes were large, almost disproportionately large for her face, luminous and steady.

"I'm frightfully sorry," she said. "I wasn't going to talk about my husband's affairs. . . ."

"No, do go on," Russell insisted. "If I . . . I'm no longer professionally involved . . . If you'd like to talk to me about anything I can help you with . . . ?"

"Oh, no," she said. And then she laughed. "I'm just being self-indulgent. I'm using you as a sort of confessor. Do you mind?"

"No," he answered.

"In that case," she said, "let's go on. I mustn't keep Roger waiting. . . . You don't know it, but we have met before."

"At Lancaster House. . . ."

"Yes."

"And at the Royal Aeronautical Society."

"Yes."

"For about two moments each time. . . ."

"Yes. It's clever of you to remember me."

"Not really. I remembered most of all the expression on your face—it was . . . rather dead."

"How horrid!"

"You were with your husband—but you had an air of detachment."

"My husband hates receptions and cocktail-parties. They're an agony for him. . . . I hate them too. . . . I never know what to say. . . ."

"You looked like something in Bond Street. . . ."

"One of the tarts? How very rude you are!"

Her silk stole became entangled in a cactus thorn and he helped her to disengage it. He had elevated her conversation to the level of flippancy, and he was content.

"I didn't mean that at all. I meant that you looked like something on the other side of the plate-glass windows—expensive, remote, beautiful. . . ."

She smiled and seemed pleased. Then: "You're quite wrong!"

"Entirely?" he asked.

"I think. . . ." she began. At that moment the spot-light

in the hotel went out and they were left in a blinding darkness.

"Hello," Russell called out. "Where are you?"

"I'm here," she said, and there was a faint tremor in her voice. "I can't see a thing."

"Well, don't move," he said.

"I couldn't if I wanted to," she replied, reassured by his voice. "I've taken root."

After a second or two, he could see the paler sky against the dark shoulder of the hill, the few remaining lights in the village and a faint glow from a shuttered window in the annexe. High above them, a single illuminated window in the hotel stared out like a bogus moon.

"Can you see now?" he asked her.

"A few things above eye-level," she replied, "nothing below."

"In that case," he said, "let me guide you."

He stretched out his hand, touched her forearm and lost it, and then felt the tips of her fingers reaching towards him.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Here," she replied, and he took her hand in his as they edged their way towards the villa.

"I'm longing to see Peter again," she said inconsequentially.

"Peter?"

"My son—he's fifteen—he went sailing in Salcombe."

Her hand was firm and dry in his. It was also immobile, and he felt the sweat start in his palm.

"We took him with us last year to the Balearics—he loved it. He's not a bit like Jennifer. She's in Holland with a school friend. She's my daughter—thirteen and talks of boys."

"They all do," Russell answered.

"Peter adores his father, as you can imagine—just one moment, I can't see a thing—I thought the stone was a step."

"Does he like flying?"

"Adores it. But Roger and I have made a pact—Peter's never to fly alone with Roger, and never on our own airline."

"Why not?"

"I don't quite know. . . . It's like being a doctor and not wanting to treat your own family. . . . He looks older than fifteen."

And so he thought he'd better make the banal observation, and did so.

"Oh, no," she said. "I wasn't particularly young. I was twenty-two when I married. I'm thirty-eight."

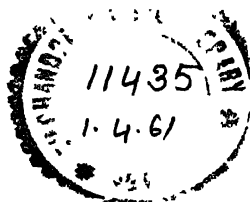
They had now arrived at the long straight path, faintly lit by a lamp, that led to the annexe, and feeling her fingers open he released her hand. They walked slowly side by side, and he watched her face, slightly inclined to the ground, reflective and young. Now he spoke the sentence, the compliment whose insipidity was overcome by the surprise of truth.

"You look very much younger than thirty-eight," he said.

"Do I?" Her voice was light and casual. "When are you leaving?" she asked.

"The day after tomorrow. Perhaps we'll meet on the beach before then."

"I doubt it," she said, and he saw that she had a small frown beneath the peak of her hair. "Roger likes to leave early for Cabasson—it's a nice little beach. We take a picnic and go there every day."



"I prefer Le Lavandou," he said, with a feeling of exclusion. She paused for a moment, and turned her face to him and smiled.

"We're not very rigid," she said. "Perhaps tomorrow—I don't know—we may come to Le Lavandou."

"That will be very nice. . . . It occurred to me . . . perhaps you and your husband might care to come to Madame Nodier's excursion."

"What on earth's that?"

"Her trip to the island—La Roseraie—she does it once a month. It's a great honour to be invited, I'm told."

Laura frowned slightly. "La Roseraie—" she repeated. "I always get them mixed up. Is la Roseraie 'nu intégral' or guided missiles?"

"Neither," Russell answered. "It's the third one—the one you see on the horizon in the morning before the mist rises."

"Oh, that one," she said, and she clasped her hands in delight. "I adore it. It's so peculiar. It disappears at about eight o'clock and then, quite suddenly, towards sunset, it rises again from the sea—all coral and pink and glowing—and then it goes and you think you'll never see it again."

"It's volcanic," said Russell.

"I've always wanted to go there," said Laura, tugging at a bush, "but there's no boat service."

"Madame Nodier's arranged for a launch. Would you care to ask your husband? I'm sure the old girl would love you to come. . . ."

"Who else is coming?" Laura asked suddenly.

"Oh, I don't know," said Russell. "The usual crowd—the Fretts-Parkers, the Courcins—at least, M. Courcin—Marianne won't leave her dog—and the Italian couple, I imagine."

"And Gisèle?"

"Yes, Gisèle too—certainly Gisèle. Madame Nodier never travels without her. It's extraordinary how, when Gisèle's not there, she can do everything for herself, and when Gisèle is here—she can do nothing."

"Poor Gisèle!" said Laura, "I feel so sorry for her."

"Why?" Russell asked.

"She's so very pretty—and so much at the disposal of other people."

"The disposal?"

"I think so," said Laura. And then, changing the subject, "I'll ask my husband, but I'm not very hopeful—he hates organised parties and he's got a very special mistrust of parties organised by Madame Nodier."

Russell shrugged his shoulders. "I have more faith in her. Underneath all that blowsiness she's a woman of great understanding and charm. She's been very kind to me."

"Kind?" she repeated. "What a curious word to use. Why should you have need of kindness from someone like Madame Nodier?"

Russell smiled and said: "I think you'd better go in, Mrs. Metcalfe, I wouldn't like you to catch cold—."

"I know," she replied, "The climate at Castelnau les Fleurs is temperate—warm by day, dropping by ten degrees at night. It's all in the brochure. Anyhow, thank you for seeing me back. I don't know what I would have done. I'm blind as a bat."

"I enjoyed it very much. Walking down the terrace at night is always an adventure. You've a good chance of falling either into the sea or into a cactus."

"Are you going straight back to London?"

"No. I'm going to Rome. I've a job to do there. Rome in August isn't my idea of Heaven."

"It's ghastly. I'm told they've had a plague of wasps."

"That and mosquitoes. . . ."

Russell wanted to go on talking to her so that he might look at her face, but their conversation dribbled into hesitations. Then, as he was about to say "good night," wondering whether to shake hands, a voice called harshly from the shadows of the eucalyptus trees at the end of the patch—"Laura!"

Her mouth, which had begun to smile, trembled for a moment and drooped.

"Good night," she said quickly. "I must run."

He waited till she reached her husband, whom he now saw outlined against the porch. He could hear her speak in the gentle voice that in the last hour had become familiar to him, although the words were only a murmur; but when Metcalfe spoke—he had taken her arm in his—his voice was emphatic and challenging.

"Who is that fellow?" he asked.

When they were out of sight Russell walked into the annexe and to his bedroom. Without switching on the light he opened the shutters and, smoking a cigarette as he sat on the bed, watched the window at the eastern end of the hotel.

But he wasn't thinking of Gisèle, except that when he met her again he would have to explain why he hadn't returned. And after an hour, he fell asleep.

Chapter Two

AN Algerian boy wailing "Cacahuètes! Cacahuètes!" came stumbling over the outstretched legs and the children at play in the front row of the deck-chairs.

"Cacahuètes?" he asked, pushing his basket of peanuts under Madame Nodier's chin. She waved him away with her stick, erect on her high-backed chair, the only woman on the beach with a hat, white and at ease.

"What were you saying, Mr. Parker?" she asked Fretts-Parker, who lay reddened in the sun. It was eleven-thirty, and they were waiting for noon and the swim to the raft that rose and fell, slightly top-heavy, on the scallops of the sea.

"I was saying," said Fretts-Parker with emphasis, "that I'm finding it harder and harder to keep the yacht at Tropez."

"I adore Tropez," his wife echoed, her eyes closed, her thin face leather-brown and polished with an oily emollient. She had pulled down the straps of her white swimming-costume and, unknown to herself, had displaced the boned structure of her corsage. A long, flabby breast peered from the confusion and Russell, stretched out on the sand, looked away.

"Where do you keep your yacht?" he asked Fretts-Parker.

"At Tropez—Tropez!" he replied. He ~~let~~ ^{lost} out the prefix with a possessive familiarity.

"Well, why don't you shift it?" Russell said indifferently. "The trouble with Saint-Tropez——," he began, and then, deciding not to be provocative turned on his back and shut his eyes.

"What is the trouble with *Saint-Tropez*?" said Fretts-Parker, rousing his heavy body and turning on his elbow towards Russell.

"Will you return in the yacht to England?" Madame Nodier asked, flicking sand with the end of her stick on to Russell's back.

"Oh, no!" Fretts-Parker replied, distracted from his truculence. "Much too small! Edna can't stand the Bay. Sending the yacht home with the crew. We're flying. Besides, I can't stay away more than a month—can't leave the factories."

"Now if you were a lawyer . . ." said Gisèle, who had just arrived with her beach bag, and was spreading a raffia mat on the sand next to Russell. He began to rise to his feet, but she said: "Don't move. I want to sunbathe for a quarter of an hour."

"What time's the boat due, Gisèle?" her aunt asked.

"Twelve-fifteen, darling," said Gisèle, smoothing cream into her arms.

"You're such a marmalade brown," said Mrs. Fretts-Parker. "Isn't she?"

"Pale-ale brown," said Russell.

Gisèle didn't comment, combed out her hair, and lay face downwards at Russell's side. After a few moments, when they had all fallen silent and the only sounds were

the clip-clop from the ping-pong table, the vague, soporific murmur of conversation around them and an occasional cry from the children on the raft, Gisèle, her nose pressed into the mat, said to Russell:

"You know I hate you?"

"Yes."

"You know you deserve it."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't help it. I couldn't come."

"Why not?"

"I'll tell you later."

"You promise?"

"Yes."

Sheltered from Madame Nodier's contemplation by two deck-chairs, he turned on his side towards Gisèle, and she, very gently, gradually, her eyes now closed in the noonday heat, moved her left foot, with its red, almond-shaped toe-nails, till it rested on Russell's ankle.

"But taxation," Huberton was saying ten minutes later when Russell, sweating in the heat, returned to his deck-chair under the yellow umbrella. "How can you run a race if you're carrying a man on your shoulders?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?" Madame Nodier asked.

"Yes," said Huberton.

"Well," said Fretts-Parker, kicking the sand with his feet, "it's lucky for the politicians that the British are a docile people! Going in?" he asked Gisèle.

She looked quickly at Russell.

"You go on, Gisèle," he said. "I'll swim out—in about five minutes."

"You must not be late for the boat," said Madame Nodier imperatively. "The boat leaves punctually."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Huberton. "I had a message for you. Pierre-Olivier—the *chasseur*—handed it to me as I was coming down. That path, by the way, is terribly overgrown."

"It's the kitchen path," said Madame Nodier as if in total explanation. "It's reserved for the staff."

"The boat's *en panne*! . . ."

"In France everything's *en panne*," said Madame Nodier. "Permanently *en panne*!"

"It's the accumulator," said Huberton.

"It's always the accumulator, the distributor or the sump" said Gisèle.

"Any chance of Claubert repairing it?"

"Oh yes," said Huberton. "Didn't I say that? It'll be here by a quarter to one—we can grill a little more."

He rose in his white shorts, the longest on the beach, to help a boy who was trying to send a kite into the air. "Throw!" the boy commanded. And Huberton threw the inert canvas into the still air. "Not like that—higher, harder!" the boy commanded again. But there was no breeze and each time that Huberton ran, sweating and throwing, the kite, after a languid wrestle with the lower air, fell with a plop onto the sand.

"I'm going to read," said Russell.

"What?" Madame Nodier asked.

"I'm stumbling through an Italian book—*Carezza*, by Frecciano. I have to improve my vestigial Italian before I go to Rome."

"*Carezza*?" she said. "It's years since I read it. Isn't it about some tortured fellow with an attractive friend, a mistress and an ugly sister who kills herself?"

"I'm not up to that yet," said Russell.

"They were all so silly," said Huberton, who had abandoned the task of anchor-man to the kite. "I would have arranged things better." He turned to Madame Nodier, and they began to talk earnestly.

Between the pages of the paper-backed edition Russell read for the third time the letter which the page-boy had wakened him with that morning. It had in his mind the happy smell of coffee and rolls, the light of the sun and the voices of children, mingled with the clank of *boules*, as they played on the gravel outside his window.

'My dear Russell, (it went).

I want to be among the first to congratulate you, because I have the privileged position of being the first to know the news. I am, indeed, sending this to the Temple, although it may well have to travel around Europe before it reaches you.

As a friend of your father—a very close friend who always felt that for wholly accidental reasons he never received the recognition which his merits as a lawyer deserved—I look forward with confidence to seeing fulfilled in you the ambitions which, it is not too presumptuous to say, I had for him.'

Russell remembered his father, grave, absorbed and hard-up, a permanent junior, divorced and defeated. Then he thought of his mother who had died, rich and querulous, in Edinburgh the previous year. And then again of his father, gentle and bewildered, saying 'good-bye' with him to his elder brother who was killed in Italy.

He felt his eyes prickle, and he put on his dark glasses before continuing to read.

'There is (the letter went on) nothing which should prevent you from achieving in time a judgeship in the High Court. Your talents, your character and your vocation—all qualify you for a successful and happy future.

And now, if you will not resent this advice, may I suggest to you that you don't specialise *excessively*. You have established your interest in the law affecting aviation. Retain it, but don't confine yourself within its limits.

And then again, be careful in your judgements. Let them be clear, but uninspired and undistinguished. Never say anything either memorable or quotable.

Very sincerely,
ATHERBURY.'

Russell folded the letter from the Lord Chancellor put it back in the envelope with the straggling, handwritten address and Personal, underlined, and felt content. When Swinford died, he had made formal application for the vacant Recordership in company, he assumed, of about half a dozen others. He had never tried to cultivate Lord Atherbury's acquaintance; indeed, he hadn't spoken to him more than three times since his father's death. But it was not disagreeable that the Lord Chancellor should know not only of his existence but also of his work. To combine merit with the benefits of patronage, to hope that preferment wouldn't be obstructed by prejudice—Russell lay back and composed phrases to describe his condition. They were round and comfortable

He looked forward to the new Term, and thinking of London, remembered Laura and their walk down the terrace—and in a half-doze, decided that tonight he would certainly visit Gisèle.

“Good morning, Madame Nodier!”

Russell looked up and saw Laura and Roger Metcalfe standing in front of Madame Nodier’s canvas chair. He stood and greeted them too.

“This is Stephen Russell,” said Laura to her husband. And then, “This is Roger.”

“Your wife was saying,” Russell said, “that you read me for your insomnia.”

“Not a bit,” said Metcalfe, shaking hands with him. “I sometimes refer to you in the middle of the night when I’m bothered about what I’ve done or left undone.”

Russell laughed. “It’s getting terribly complicated—all this aviation law.”

“The trouble is,” said Metcalfe, sprawling his heavy, muscular body on the sand, “it’s international—and every country—naturally—wants to add its own special bit of do-it-our-way. I don’t know how you fellows keep up to date. I’ve got your third edition—and that doesn’t deal with the last Convention.”

“I’ve got that in the new edition,” said Russell, “as an appendix.”

He was looking at Laura’s back as she lay face downwards at her husband’s side. Her back was long and brown, and he could see the nape of her neck where she had tucked up her hair with a ribbon.

"How long are you staying?" he asked, making conversation.

"We're leaving tonight," said Laura, without turning around. "Roger's got to . . ."

"I don't think anyone's interested in what I've got to do," Metcalfe said roughly. Laura's voice faded as she muttered "Sorry." Russell took up his book again, and noticed how Metcalfe who a moment ago had lain like an athlete, serene and composed, now twitched in short, spasmodic movements as he lit a cigarette.

"Leaving—to-night," he said between the first, easing puffs. "I put in a call to the Ministry this morning." He addressed himself to Huberton particularly, but what he said was intended for Russell and Laura as well, almost as an explanation and an apology.

"It's easier to get an interview with the Prime Minister than the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Civil Aviation!"

"I never fail to be surprised by Parliamentary Secretaries," said Huberton. "One day they are obscure back-benchers, half-afraid to open their mouths. The next day they're full-blown Parliamentary Secretaries, the terror of the Front Bench, sand-bagging all comers at Question Time."

"Like Bewsher," said Metcalfe. "I knew the little bastard in the R.A.F.—Admin. He had a genius for turning up when others had nearly done the job—standing at attention when the C.O. came around—and collecting all the credit. Now he doesn't even answer my letters."

"He's the P.M.'s blue-eyed boy," said Russell. "Rather overgrown—but he always was. I had to complain when he was liaising with the War Office. He wouldn't leave my A.T.S. girls alone."

"He's very ugly," said Huberton. "He looks like a ventriloquist's dummy, that's got out of hand."

"Where's the boat?" Madame Nodier asked fretfully.

"I'm sure it must be due. Gisèle . . . ? Where's Gisèle?"

"I can see her on the raft," said Russell. "It's heaving a lot."

While they had been talking, a swell had stirred in the sea, and small waves were dashing against the Pédalos and the boats drawn up on the fringe of the beach. Above them, the kite now sailed and buzzed in the newly risen breeze, and the canvas of the bathing-tents clacked lightly. The sun was high and steady in the monochrome sky, and Russell spread himself under its heat.

"This is the time of day I like best," said Laura, who was lying not far away. Russell looked across at her profile horizontal with the glittering line of the sea, and she smiled to him. "It's lovely," she added. And again, "It's quite lovely."

They all lay quietly in the torpor of the heat, somnolent, the voices from the raft remote and happy, the ping-pong a metronome for sleep; Madame Nodier's chin sank on her wrinkled bosom and her stick fell into the sand.

He didn't like Metcalfe, Russell decided, and that in a way was a sanction. He sprawled there like an ox, heavy and morose and intrusive. "The time of day I like best—. It's lovely—quite lovely." He turned her voice in his mind, and remembered their walk the previous night from the hotel to the annexe, and her voice in the

darkness. If he reached London before three o'clock, he would telephone Atherbury's secretary. Perhaps he would call on him the following day. And Susan? That was all over. He didn't want to start it again. It had been over for six months, except for a single evening; they both understood, and neither had written. Susan. It was curious to think that once upon a time her very name was enough to cause in him a heart-tearing pang. When he had seen her with Edmondson at the ballet—but it was all over. Nothing. The funeral meats. Nothing at all. He could see them in bed together now. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing at all. Nothing was a most agreeable sensation. To lie under the sun and feel nothing about any human being—it was very satisfactory. He would start playing squash again. Susan had distracted him, but he would rejoin his club again. And he would learn Italian properly. Italian in three months. Two. He would try and have lessons in Rome. A month. Then home. If he reached London before three, he would certainly telephone Atherbury, Atherstone, Athelstone, Alderbury, Addlestone . . .

The sound that drew him from sleep was like the howl of a dog, mangled under the wheels of a car. It rose above the cries of the children, the beach-conversation and the crashing of waves that the mistral had churned into a tide. Russell opened his eyes, and saw that the raft was swinging and toppling in great lurches, abandoned by all but two or three swimmers who clung to its dangerous sides.

Once he had attended a Conference where in the middle of the monotonous reading of a paper by an elderly Italian jurist, a member of the audience had fallen into a fit with a strangled premonitory cry of the epileptic. It was as if the wires of the transmitters from the microphone had suddenly become suspended on a single, terrible note; and Russell had removed the earphones through which the interpreter's voice still continued its hesitant English, hoping that the inhuman sound might indeed be an electrical fault. "Perhaps the attendants . . ." the President began, and then seeing that the sick man was being carried through the doorway, said to the pallid speaker, "Let us now continue."

As the wail on the beach formed itself in Russell's consciousness, he recalled the epileptic's cry, the moment of horror accompanied by a sense of helplessness; it was unseemly, and he looked round in bewilderment at the others who, with the exception of Madame Nodier, had risen and were looking in the direction of a young woman in a two-piece bathing costume who was clinging to an older woman near the edge of the sea.

"Mother . . . Mother," the ugly, strangled sounds came from her desperate, tear-stained mouth. "He's dead . . . he's dead . . . Emile . . . the Pédalo. . . . Oh, mother, mother, mother . . . Emile . . . he's drowned." And the wail rose again as her mother held her and tried to comfort her. Around them stood a small group of people looking towards the empty sea where only the raft with the blue lettering, 'Bains Aubusson,' now abandoned by the last swimmers, heaved at its anchor. Despite the wind, the ping-pong players continued with their game. The beach attendants went on dragging the Pédalos farther inshore. And a juke-box from the Bar

Soleil had begun to play, "Quand je te tiens tout près de moi," the voice of the singer mingling with the lament.

"The poor thing," said Laura. "How awful!" A reluctant but irresistible movement of holidaymakers, half-curious, half-aghast, began to drift towards the hysterical woman.

"That's how they look at madmen in the East," Huberton said with a wave towards the onlookers who stood several paces away. "Respectfully disengaged."

Metcalfé was trying to question the mother in his imperfect French, but she, consoling her daughter and fragmentary in her explanations, could not make him understand.

"Come on, Laura," he said. "Help me!"

Then the mother said that Enile had taken a Pédalo to cross the bay as far as the jetty, and that the mistral had risen, and he hadn't returned. And now—she pointed to the bare horizon, and burst into tears with her daughter who was moaning her husband's name.

"Quickly, Gisèle," Metcalfé said, "run down to the *poste de secours*, and tell them a man's missing in the bay—a man in a Pédalo. Say he's probably been swept out to sea. They'd better get a launch out."

The crowd, relieved that someone was taking action, began to offer the woman help and advice. Fretts-Parker brought up two chairs, but they wouldn't sit.

"You there," Metcalfé said to the boatman of the Bains Aubusson, "what about putting a boat out?"

The boatman pointed to the raft, and shrugged his shoulders. "Too rough," he said. "The mistral!"

The alarm signal began to moo from Castelnau and Cabasson, and the games on the beach petered to an end

as even the children became grave, and assembled near the boats.

"Got a rope?" Metcalfe asked the boatman.

"At the *poste de secours*," he replied. "It's too rough. I'm telling you. It's too rough. It'll turn over."

Metcalfe turned to Fretts-Parker. "What do you think?" he asked.

"Looks pretty rough," said Fretts-Parker, retreating a step as a large wave dashed against the shore. "These fellows know, you know."

"It's much too rough," said Mrs. Fretts-Parker definitely.

Metcalfe looked at the two women whom someone had covered with large beach-towels, and from them to the bay.

"Oh, nonsense," he said, "In Salcombe this'd be just a nice day for sailing. Wouldn't it, Laura?"

"Well," she replied, "I'd like to it be a little calmer when Peter sails. What do you think, Mr. Russell?"

Russell, who had been standing by ineffectually, muttered, "It looks a bit rough to me."

"Anybody here row?" Metcalfe called out in a loud voice to the crowd around him. "Anyone?"

No one spoke till one of the swimmers who had been the last to leave the raft, a short, powerful Marseillais, presented himself and said: "Let's take the boat. We will row. But we need another one for the rope. You, sir . . ." to Huberton who, seeing himself addressed, took a hurried step behind the deck-chairs. "If you will help to push the boat. "

"Of course," said Huberton, re-emerging.

Two boys came running towards them with a length of rope from the Rescue Station.

"Look here, Metcalfe," Russell began.

"Can you swim?" Laura interrupted him.

"Not much."

"That's what I thought. So don't be stupid!"

She spoke to him quietly and urgently while her husband and the Frenchman were coiling the rope.

"I can grab the rope," Russell said.

"You're not to be stupid," said Laura. "They won't go a hundred yards before that thing turns over. Roger's a champion swimmer, and his little friend looks as if he's swum the Channel. . . . Please don't be silly!"

"Like to give us a hand, Russell?" Metcalfe called out, and Russell felt in the question a taunt and a challenge. But before he could answer, he heard a slap, a face-slap, a palm-slap on a face followed by another and yet another and the outpouring of feminine abuse like the gush of a Roman candle. Under a storm of blows, a thin man with an ice-cream cone in one hand was staggering away from the young woman who only a few minutes before had been weeping, but now was screaming. "You beast . . . you beast . . . to frighten me like that . . . beast, beast, beast. . . ." Her imprecations faded as she clawed at him, and he embraced her.

"Oh, Emile," she wailed, "I thought . . . I thought you were drowned!"

"You see," said Huberton, "the hundred faces of love."

Over her head Emile made a sheepish expression to Metcalfe and Russell as if to say, "These women!" The ice-cream cone fell up-ended into the sand, and the assembly began to disperse, laughing about Emile who had, in fact, landed his *Pédalo* at the jetty when the sea began to rise, and had returned on foot with his gift of ice-cream.

"She would have been better off if he'd drowned," said Madame Nodier. Her white draperies billowed as she approached.

"Really, aunt," said Gisèle, "I'm against capital punishment—even for delinquent husbands."

"Marriage," Madame Nodier grumbled, "Is a misplaced act of faith!"

"And what advice would you give an engaged couple, Madame Nodier?" Russell asked.

"The very simple advice," she replied, "That the ideal is the enemy of the real. High hopes are the death of marriage. Don't you agree, Huberton?"

"Most certainly," he said. "The recipe for a successful marriage is a firm belief in divorce."

"How very cynical you all are!" said Laura. "If you love, you must believe in its permanence."

Huberton laughed.

"I'm a Pavlovian," he said. "I believe real love is an impression and that, like all impressions, it fades. *Non è vero*, Stephen?"

"No," said Russell.

"You see," said Laura triumphantly. "I have support."

Gisèle looked languidly from Laura to Russell and smiled.

"We must postpone our trip to the island," Madame Nodier said to her guests. "It's dangerous approaching La Roseraie in a sea like this."

"Oh, I'm so disappointed," said Laura.

"Never mind, my dear," said Madame Nodier, taking her arm, and moving towards the promenade. "You must come back in September. September and April—those are the best months. (Gisèle, bring up the bags.) The grapes are on the slopes. The terraces on the island are

mauve and blue. . . . You too, Mr. Russell . . . you have never seen the island in the early autumn. . . . Gisèle!" She stamped with her stick, and paused, out of breath. "Gisèle, give me your arm. . . . Where's your husband, Mrs. Metcalfe?"

"He's gone up the short way to the hotel. He's dragged poor old Christopher up. They said they wanted a drink after all the drama."

"Very well—we will give you a lift in the car."

"Oh, no thanks," said Laura. "I'm not in a hurry. I'll just change, and come up slowly. There's heaps of time."

"What about you, Stephen?" Gisèle asked.

Russell hesitated. Then he said: "I think I'll walk, thank you so much. I didn't get my swim in. . . ."

But before he could finish his sentence, Gisèle had turned away and was helping her aunt into the Delage.

Far beneath them, the sea looked calm again, merging in a haze with the sky. To the east lay the pine forests, dark green and unstirring. And above them, in the vignette of leaves glittered the roof of the hotel. Laura was sitting on one of the flat stones that provided an irregular stairway to the Royal, and Russell, a step below her, was waiting for her to restart the slow ascent.

"Extraordinary how much hotter it gets once you're inland," said Laura.

"Yes."

"The mistral doesn't seem able to climb."

"That's an aviation metaphor."

"Is it? I wasn't thinking of anything to do with aircraft. I was simply thinking how lovely it is here—so calm and quiet, and no people. I hate people, don't you?"

"No. I rather like them."

"In that case we'd better move on."

She swung herself down to his side, and they leaned against a white boulder facing the light west wind with the hot sun on their faces.

"I wish we weren't leaving tonight," Laura said. "The thought of London . . ."

"Yes," said Russell, "I know exactly. . . ."

"Listen to the cicadas," said Laura. "Listen."

They both were silent, and the sound of the cicadas rose creaking in the hot air.

"They could drive one mad," said Russell.

"I like them today," said Laura. "Very much. When will you be back in England?"

"In about a month—perhaps less."

"I suppose you start judging people soon after that."

Russell laughed. "Oh, no, I fix my own Sessions. Not till October, if I can help it."

"And what else do you do?" she asked. "I somehow visualise lawyers as permanently bewigged."

"Not permanently. I've been known to appear in private—uncovered."

"Where?"

"Well—I like concerts—pictures—all that sort of thing. And you?"

"Yes—all that sort of thing," she repeated.

They had begun to climb the path again.

"And your husband?" Russell asked.

"He used to—rather. But he's got such a lot to think about—the aircraft, routes, staff. He loves it, of course.

. . . And then, there's all this nonsense about his licence. . . ."

"Nonsense?" Russell asked sharply.

"Oh, I don't want to pretend," said Laura. "I know it's not nonsense. I know it's very serious. I don't just mean for him. We're all entitled to risk our own lives. Not other people's . . ."

"Overloading is pretty serious," said Russell. "But it isn't . . . it wasn't established by the Enquiry. That's really the point."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" she observed eagerly. "It wasn't established. . . . Roger likes what he calls 'dicing'."

"'Dicing'?"

"You know, like small boys who run out in front of motor-cars and then run back. That's dicing."

"I see."

They paused again, and Russell looked at her brown face and steady eyes.

"I imagine you're against dicing," he said.

"Very much."

"Was that why you didn't want me to go with your husband this morning?"

"In the boat?"

"Yes."

She looked away for a second, and then returned his glance. "I thought it was silly of you to risk being drowned. . . . It would have been so—untidy."

"I see. In that case, I'd better tell you. . . . I'm not sure if I was going at all."

"You might have," she said, linking her arm in his. "You're the defiant type."

They walked on without speaking, till at last she said, "Wasn't it curious how that woman behaved on the

beach? That awful anguish changing so quickly into concentrated hate—and then back again into desperate affection.”

“It’s very common,” said Russell, “The love-hate relationship. Love is a desire to possess absolutely—and the hatred springs from the impossibility of ever doing it.”

“But don’t you think there’s such a thing as absolute love as well as absolute hatred?”

“I don’t know,” said Russell. “I really don’t know. I’ve never known either. My hates, at any rate, have always been adulterated by tolerance.”

“And love?”

“Love is an omnibus word—it means too much and too little. I don’t like it.”

“But you must have used it yourself in your life. What does it mean when you use it?”

“I no longer use it.”

“Now really,” Laura said. “This undergraduate disillusionment!”

“Oh, no, when I was at Oxford, I believed in all the abstractions. My disillusionment, if you want to call it that, is a product of maturity . . . of course I’ve used . . . I’ve often used the word ‘love’. It’s the universal password—Saturday night in the night-clubs and Sunday morning in church . . . I only meant to say that . . .”

“. . . that you’ve debased the currency.”

“That’s right, Mrs. Metcalfe,” he said. “You put these things so well. You took the platitude out of my mouth.” Then, seeing her frown, he added, “I mean it. . . . There’s no other way of putting it. There are words that lose their value through excess.”

He felt her bare arm pressed against his elbow, and

where their flesh touched a small patch of sweat began to form. They walked like that till they heard the conversation and the clinking of glasses from the terrace which the flowering shrubs concealed.

"And what about Medor?" they could hear Huberton asking in indignation. "They'll want to quarantine him."

"That's all right," came Metcalfe's voice in reply. It was gay and excited. "I'll put him in a crate and take him back as luggage. What's he like on pethedine?"

"Excellent," said Huberton. "Medor . . ." and his voice drifted away.

"Well," said Laura, disengaging her arm. "I'd better say good-bye. I've got to pack this afternoon. . . . When are you leaving?"

Russell took the little finger of her right hand between his fingers, and said, "I think I'll probably leave this evening too. I'll spend the night in Marseilles."

"Good!" said Laura, her eyes brightening. "Good!"
"Why?"

"It's selfish of me, I know. But I wouldn't like to think of you enjoying all this—while I'm being air-sick."

"You won't be," said Russell, letting go of her hand. "I think we'd better get in, and change."

"Not yet. . . . It's nice here. Let's stay here another three minutes. . . ." Her eyes were brimming with tears, and Russell said, "What are you crying about?"

"I'm not," she answered, flicking at the end of her eyelashes. "In any case, there's nothing personal about it. I always cry when I say 'good-bye.' Anyone. It's just the thought of being separated."

"I wonder," said Russell, "I wonder if we could meet again—perhaps have lunch in London—when I come back from Rome."

"Oh, yes," she said, looking up eagerly. "That would be very pleasant—very pleasant indeed."

"Well," said Russell, "let's arrange it now."

"All right."

"I'll meet you," he said slowly and reflectively, "where?"

"Anywhere you like—perhaps not too . . ."

"Yes, of course. What about the Royal Academy—in the courtyard on the steps?"

"When?"

"On August 14th. I'll come back a week earlier."

"Will you really?"

"Of course I will—one o'clock, then! One o'clock on the steps of the Royal Academy."

"I'll be there."

"Don't forget."

"No, of course not."

They hurried up the slope leading to the terrace where Huberton and Metcalfe were drinking together.

"Hello, darling," said Laura, kissing her husband on the cheek.

"Hello, you two," said Metcalfe morosely. "Come and have a drink!"

Chapter Three

FOR the second time, Metcalfe edged his car slowly along Berkeley Square, looking for a gap in the congestion of vehicles around the green. The rain had been falling heavily for over an hour, and, although it was only five o'clock, the lights in the embrasures of the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation were lit against the passing gloom. Metcalfe's appointment with the Parliamentary Secretary was for a quarter to five. Irritably, he hurried the car once again around the Square, and then, finding no place to park, drew up outside the Ministry itself.

There was a vacant place between two large black cars with standards for pennants, and Metcalfe began to reverse the Lagonda between them. Despite the rain, the temperature was over seventy-five degrees, and Metcalfe felt his shirt become clammy with his effort. At last he succeeded in manoeuvring into position. There was hardly enough room for him to open the door and disengage himself. But he had squeezed himself out and was locking the door when he heard a voice say: "Sorry, sir, you can't leave it here." The policeman, young and sallow-faced, added: "You'll have to move it."

"Why?" Metcalfe asked curtly.

"Reserved for the Ministry," the policeman replied. "Ministry cars only!"

Metcalfe finished locking the door without replying, and began to walk away.

"I said you can't leave it here," said the policeman, his mouth tightening.

"Look here, old chap," said Metcalfe patiently, "I've got an appointment. I'm late. I'll be out in half an hour."

"You've got to move it, sir," the policeman insisted. "Ministry cars only."

"And if I don't?" asked Metcalfe.

"It's up to you," said the policeman. "You're causing an obstruction."

"Well," said Metcalfe, "I'll take a chance on that."

"You'd better let me see your driving licence and certificate of insurance."

"Look here, I'm in a frightful hurry. I'll deal with all this when I come out. . . . Damn it all, you've got my car!"

"I'd like to see it now, sir, if you don't mind."

Metcalfe fumbled in his breast pocket and drew out a wad of papers.

"I haven't got either," he said. As he bent forward, a rivulet of water fell from the rim of his hat onto his wallet. "But if you like," he added, "I can give you a cancelled pilot's licence."

The policeman drew a pad from his uniform, took Metcalfe's name and address, and told him to produce the documents within five days at the nearest police-station.

"Anything else?" Metcalfe asked. He looked at his watch; he was already late.

"That's the lot, said the policeman, "unless you want to make a statement."

"I do," said Metcalfe.

"Go ahead," said the policeman, his pencil poised over the soggy paper.

"Well, take this down. . . . The police would be a damn sight better off catching . . ."

"I know," said the young policeman sadly, putting his book away. "We'd be better off catching burglars. . . . Sorry, sir. It's the job."

Metcalfe smiled, patted him on the shoulder, and hurried in.

"What room number?" he asked the attendant who took him up in the lift.

"Six hundred and ten," said the attendant. "He's moved."

"Well, I'll find it," said Metcalfe. "Don't you trouble."

"It's not allowed," said the attendant. "I'll hand you over to my colleague. . . . Got your pass?"

"Yes," said Metcalfe.

"Parliamentary Secretary," said the first attendant to another who was waiting for them on the sixth floor.

"You the quarter to five appointment, sir?" asked the second attendant.

"Yes."

"That's it. The quarter to five appointment," said the attendant ruminatively as he limped down the long corridor ahead of Metcalfe, swinging the buff-coloured pass in his hand.

"There you are sir," he said, knocking at the door of Room 609. "The Parliamentary Secretary's secretary."

"Greaves," said the secretary, opening the door and shaking Metcalfe's hand. "The Parliamentary Secretary won't keep you five minutes. . . . It's a filthy day. Come up from the country?"

"No I've got a flat in Portland Place—I've been spending a lot of time in London lately—this appeal business. . . .

"Yes, of course," said the secretary, changing the subject. "Had your holidays yet? You're looking brown."

"Weather-beaten," said Metcalfe. "I've been back nearly three weeks."

Their conversation halted, and Metcalfe lit a cigarette as he rehearsed in his mind what he was going to say to Bewsher. He had met him before during the war, when Bewsher was serving in R.A.F. Administration. He himself was already a squadron-leader in operations, and he remembered Bewsher's ingratiating smile as he presented himself before him. When he had written to the Parliamentary Secretary about his appeal, the reply declining an interview had come from Greaves. That, he supposed, was normal and correct. The proper channels. 'Today's appointment was almost an accident. Russell, that last day they had drinks together, had mentioned that he knew Bewsher well, and had offered to arrange the meeting. It was decent of him—very—although it was typical that he could only get an interview under the Old Pals Act. Typical.

"Mr. Bewsher's ready," he heard Greaves say, and he rose quickly and followed him into the next room.

"Just one moment," said Bewsher without looking up from the folio of letters that he was signing. "Be with you in half a tick."

Metcalfe stood uncertainly for a few seconds; then he went to the window, turning his back on Bewsher, and looked out over Berkeley Square. He had already decided that if Bewsher didn't rise and greet him courteously by the time he counted a hundred, he would leave.

At sixty-seven, he heard Bewsher's chair move as he stood with outstretched hand saying: "Terribly sorry, Metcalfe. . . . And how are you?"

He was smiling his Constituency Smile, a brilliant expansion of the mouth and the cheek muscles while the eyes above them remained thoughtful of other things.

"Very well, thanks. And how are you?" asked Metcalfe, relieved by the form of the Minister's greeting. Bewsher, he thought, was sleeker than he used to be, but he still had the same pseudo-boyishness which had seemed excessive in him even as a young man.

"Up to my eyes! Up to my eyes!" said Bewsher.

"Last time we met was at Faversham—1944," said Metcalfe.

"Yes, seems a long time ago."

Bewsher's smile had disappeared as if turned off by an electric switch. "An Airman for Civil Aviation" had been the slogan when his cousin's newspaper was canvassing his claims. The Parliamentary Secretary felt uneasy at the thought of his last meeting with Metcalfe. Their roles had been different. He didn't want to recall Faversham.

"Well, Metcalfe," he said in a formal voice. "What can I do for you?"

"Quite briefly," Metcalfe began, "I felt that as Parliamentary Secretary . . ."

"No, just one moment," Bewsher interrupted him.

The Constituency Smile was back. "I'm not really seeing you as Parliamentary Secretary." He spoke the last two words in italics.

"What then?"

"As your M.P.—Calthorpe's in my constituency, and when Russell asked me . . ."

"I don't quite understand."

"Well, my dear fellow—," Bewsher rose and started walking around the back of Metcalfe's chair. "I could scarcely see you informally like this as Parliamentary Secretary when you have an appeal *sub judice* with the Ministry. Now could I?"

"I suppose . . ." said Metcalfe.

"But," said Bewsher, and he paused, wagging at Metcalfe the miniature penknife at the end of his platinum watch-chain, "it's perfectly proper for me to see you as your M.P. See what I mean?"

"Bit subtle for me," said Metcalfe. "Still—you can call yourself what you like—," Bewsher looked at his watch, "and I'm not going to keep you more than ten minutes. What I'm asking is simply this. My licence is suspended."

"Yes—sorry about that. Been in touch with the Pilot's Association?"

"No. I'll deal with this my way. I don't want anyone's help—not even B.A.L.P.A. . . . All I'm asking is this. I've put in my appeal to the Minister, but he won't be back from the Famagusta Conference till late September."

"That's right."

"Well, as you know . . . Nightfreight's got the charter contract for the Malta stores. It means steady flying throughout September. . . . The contract's been confirmed despite—despite everything."

"Good. I'm delighted."

"My aircraft—and my staff—are about as good as you can get. They got a clean bill from the Court of Enquiry."

"Yes, I remember. You have a very good organisation," said Bewsher. "Very good."

"That's precisely the point," said Metcalfe, leaning towards the Minister who had stopped prowling and was now clicking his desk calendar. "I built up the firm on my own. I've not only developed it from two ex-R.A.F. Dakotas into one of the biggest freight charter companies; I've been in operational control the whole time. There's never been a month—until lately—not in the last six years that I haven't flown—carried freight myself—at least once."

"Jolly good," said Bewsher.

"It's not so good," said Metcalfe, "that just when we have the Malta contract my licence is withdrawn. I want to ask—I suppose it's a favour. Can my licence be reinstated pending my appeal?"

He followed Bewsher with his eyes as the Parliamentary Secretary rose reflectively and stood pondering. After a few moments, Bewsher pressed a buzzer, and Greaves entered immediately.

"Did you tell Miss Simpson," he asked, "to get me those tickets for the Haymarket tonight?"

"Yes, sir," said Greaves. "They're in my office."

"Thank you so much," said the Parliamentary Secretary. Then turning to Metcalfe, "I'm so sorry. . . . Yes. Your licence. . . . Look here, old chap. You know the Navigation Order, 1954 . . ."

"I know it very well."

"In that case, I need only read you Article 31, clause 1.

... 'The Minister may, on sufficient ground, etc. etc. . . . suspend and endorse any certificate, licence . . . and so on.'

"I know all about that. . . . What I'm asking is that the Minister . . ."

"Yes, that the Minister should suspend his suspension. . . . It's difficult, Metcalfe. Very difficult. . . . Still, it's not my pigeon. Under the Act, it's the Minister himself who has the last word. . . . Tell you what, Metcalfe, why don't you send in a written application—refer to clause 4—directly to the Minister—you know, we're sending papers to Famagusta. Tell him all about the Malta supply contract—national interest and so on. . . . Do that, old chap. You'll probably get the answer through me." He was looking at his watch again.

"Shall I send *you* the application in the first instance?" Metcalfe asked, rising

"As you like," said Bewsher, boyish again. "Greaves," he called out through the half-open door, "let's have those tickets! . . . All right, Metcalfe," shaking hands, "nice to have seen you again. I hope all goes well. . . . Had your holiday yet?"

He was ushering him to the door.

"Yes," said Metcalfe. "Do I have to go into all the details of my case again?"

"Just as you please . . . see how it goes. . . . Well, cheerio."

"Good-bye," said Metcalfe. He took his hat from the peg in the secretary's office, and walked thoughtfully to the lift. He had seen Bewsher; he had discussed his licence; and it was almost as if he hadn't been there at all.

When he reached his car outside the building, a new

policeman and a Ministry attendant were already standing there.

"This your car, sir?" the policeman asked.

Laura left in mid-sentence the letter she was writing to Peter, and greeted Metcalfe as he came through the door.

"Hello, darling," she said, kissing him on the cheek, "what sort of day have you had?"

"Foul" he answered. "Give me a drink—gin and something."

"Tonic?"

"Anything. Any messages for me?"

"Only from Calthorpe. Bill wants to know whether those reconditioned engines . . ."

"Oh, Christ, that fellow can never make a decision."

He went to the telephone and asked for Calthorpe 300.

"Anything else?"

"I don't know, darling. I'll ask Wilson. I haven't been in long."

"You never are."

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean," said Metcalfe, drinking from the glass she had prepared for him, ". . . Calthorpe 300? Mr. Gregory!"

"What do you mean?" Laura repeated. "I spent the whole afternoon buying you a present."

"Oh, Bill," said Metcalfe into the telephone, "what's this about the reconditioned engines?" He listened while

Gregory, his General Manager, explained the refit that he proposed.

"I see . . . yes. That's all right. Thank you, Bill. Everything O.K. with the Marseilles lot? . . . Good! Good!"

He put the telephone down and turned to Laura.

"So sorry, darling. What were you saying?"

She had begun to arrange a bowl of roses, and said: "Nothing. . . . Tell me what you've been doing?"

It was a ritual—the drink, the day's analysis, the communion before dinner. Apart from the war years, they had scarcely ever left each other except for his own periodical flights for Nightfreight. Now they could talk with half-uttered sentences, with silences and glances as untranslatable to strangers as a code.

"I saw Bewsher."

"Oh, yes." She had begun to write her letter again.

"Said he'd send my application to the Minister."

"He seems a terrible little prig. I saw him on a news-reel yesterday getting out of a helicopter in Hyde Park."

"Absolute little pipsqueak."

"Yes."

"One of these days I'll tell him where he gets off."

"Another drink, darling?"

"About the same."

Laura paused in writing her letter, and before giving her husband another drink, asked him casually: "Was he surprised?"

"Why should he be?"

"I mean that Stephen Russell . . ."

"Oh, no . . . that seemed quite normal. . . . He didn't mention him."

"I see."

She poured the gin into his glass, and handed him a slice of lemon on a cocktail stick.

"It was nice of Russell to arrange the meeting like that," she said, and kissed her husband's forehead. "Sweet of him."

"Well," said Metcalfe, picking up the evening paper, "we'll see. . . . I had a letter from Jennifer. Wants to live on a barge. Any news of Peter?"

"Yes, he 'phoned this evening—reversing the charges as usual. He said he's having a wonderful time, and is going to stay another week. What do you think?"

"Of course," said Metcalfe, his sullen expression lightening. "Tell him from me—he can stay as long as he likes. But not too long. I'd like to see him before he goes back to school."

Laura walked over to him, and put her arms around his neck from behind. "You're an excessively indulgent father—but excessively. Were you spoilt too when you were young?"

"No. You know I wasn't. My father was a soldier and a tough. I hardly ever saw him—except to be told off. Now let me read."

"What about your present, darling," she said. "I've told you now. Do you want to see it? Or do you want to wait till tomorrow?"

He smiled to her, and said: "I can wait, poppet, but you can't. Come on. Let's see it."

He watched her affectionately as she walked with a graceful, languid stride to the table by the window where she took up a large, brown paper parcel.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's a Chagall," she said. "Unwrap it, darling."

He unwrapped the picture, and said: "Hoist it up for me. I want to get it straight."

"It's called 'Orchestre de Nuit,'" she said. "It's a lithograph."

"Yes."

He examined the dark blue of the picture for a few moments, extracting in his mind the shapes and composition, and then he said, "Pretty good! What are those two doing?"

"Those," she answered, "those are lovers. They're levitated. They're floating in a sort of dream. Isn't it lovely?"

"Aerodynamically impossible," he said, and drew her onto his knees. "Thank you, Laura. Thank you very much. We'll have it in the bedroom."

"Not now," she said, disengaging herself from his hands.

"All right," he replied with a frown.

"Don't be silly darling," Laura said. "Evelyn's coming to dinner."

"For God's sake," said Metcalfe, rising. "Why don't you let me know when your sister's coming to dinner so that I can arrange to be out?"

"Please don't talk about my sister like that," Laura answered angrily.

"And that pompous bore of a husband. I can't talk to that fellow. . . ."

"You can't talk to him because he's a Cambridge don and your knowledge of classical history is rudimentary. So's mine. But that doesn't mean we've got to be offensive to Evelyn."

Metcalfe poured himself another drink, and turned to face Laura.

"Look here, Laura," he said, "I know Evelyn's your sister, and you have every right to entertain her whenever you want to. This is your flat as much as mine. But I have the right—an equal right—to absent myself if I want to."

"Well, do so."

"All right, I will."

"Please don't shout—you don't want Wilson . . ."

"Yes, I do want Wilson—I want him to know exactly what it's like to have to put up with all the damn nonsense that I've got to put up with here. Never to be able to relax! Never to be able to think there's *one* night in the week when I'll be rid of Evelyn and her husband and your ghastly mob of hangers-on! . . . I'm going out."

"Oh, Roger," Laura said, taking the glass from his hand. "Don't excite yourself like this. It's so bad for you. And you haven't taken your . . ."

Metcalfé snatched the glass back, and as he did so it fell and broke into fragments on the edge of the fireplace. Without a word, Laura bent down and began to pick them up. Metcalfé rang the bell, a prolonged, angry peal, for the butler.

"I'm sorry, Wilson," said Laura, straightening herself when he appeared. "Mr. Metcalfé dropped a glass."

"No, Mr. Metcalfé didn't," said Metcalfé, his face suffused. "Mrs. Metcalfé was wrestling with Mr. Metcalfé and Mr. Metcalfé knocked the glass on the floor."

The butler picked up the broken glass on a small shovel, and quickly and silently left the room.

"Dinner's at a quarter to eight," said Laura with her back to her husband.

"Well, I hope you enjoy it," he said savagely. "I'm going to Calthorpe."

“Roger!” she said, turning towards him.

But he had already stepped over the litter from the picture’s wrappings, and was opening the door.

On the rise above Calthorpe Plain, Metcalfe drew up his car. The red approach-lights to the runway cut across the road and the fields almost to the horizon, and he sat looking for a few minutes at the airport buildings. When he had taken Calthorpe over, it had been a derelict station left by the United States Air Force, with weeds and crops remembering an old habit that struggled through fissures in the concrete. Every window in the war-time huts had been smashed; everything movable had been torn away and pillaged. He could still remember the stench, the abandoned piles of comic supplements from American newspapers decaying on the damp floors, the walls scrawled with autobiographical messages.

Gradually, he had transformed it. He had worked with his own hands to convert it into what it now was—one of the leading charter airfields in the country. He had already been carrying overseas freight with his two aircraft for six months when the Civil Aviation Act was passed. But after some difficulty in persuading the authorities that his night services would not compete with those of the public corporations, he had obtained an exceptional licence to carry freight only. Then he had sublet his facilities at Calthorpe to Pegasus Ltd. for the transport of livestock and to Wingaway for their ferry-service. Calthorpe had grown steadily in importance; the Treasury had established a permanent Customs Office.

For over eight years, Nightfreight had held an unblemished record of collection and delivery. Apart from a few trivial accidents, not a single mishap had occurred to any of his aircraft. "Nightfreight—never late." He had been proud of the jingle, and it was true.

Every now and again, he had received offers from promoters interested in the prospects of capital appreciation to float Nightfreight as a public company. Each time he had refused. As long as he himself had personal control of its operations, he was certain that the firm would flourish. His administrative staff was small and cheap; Bill Gregory, the General Manager who had served under him during the war, was the only one earning over £2,000 a year. He, alone, by his careful supervision of cargoes, had organised the firm's prosperity.

The two crashes earlier in the year had been bad luck. Once again, as he surveyed the loaders next to the aircraft, Metcalfe repeated in his mind the hostile questions at the Court of Enquiry. Was it his practice to examine personally the manifest? Did he ever personally interfere in matters of trim? Had he ever personally instructed the Captain of any aircraft to add cargo in excess of what he considered prudent? *Personally.*

Moulton, Counsel for the Ministry, had used the word *personally* like an insult. But if it hadn't been for him *personally* there'd be no Calthorpe today. No one had been killed, even though the aircraft were written off. It's true the insurance companies had had to pay. But what did they expect? All premiums and no indemnities?

Metcalfe left his car outside the buildings, and walked towards the aircraft that were being fuelled and loaded. The rain had long ceased, and the night sky was full of stars, washed. The Bear, Orion, the Pleiads—Metcalfe

saw them spread out like a map, a navigational map, the channels of the sky which had attracted his curiosity and affection since childhood. He threw his head back, and stared at the ink-blue night, breathing in the summer air with its drifting scent of hay and listening to the mumble and murmur of engines accelerating and decelerating on the perimeter.

"Good evening, sir," a voice said behind him.

"Hello, Bill—all set?"

"All set, sir."

"What's that stuff on the side there?" Metcalfe pointed to two crates which had been dumped on the apron.

"I had to off-load those," said Gregory. "Over-weight."

Metcalfe said brusquely: "Let's see the manifest."

Gregory went away to the office to get a copy of the cargo's details, and Metcalfe climbed into the fuselage of the aircraft.

"Here you are," said Gregory surlily. Metcalfe studied the document, squatting on his heels, and then said: "I don't get this. You've got at least another two hundred pounds to spare. What's the weight of those crates?"

"Hundred and eighty."

"Well, why the hell aren't they loaded?"

Gregory hesitated before replying. "The Captain wants to keep a bit in hand—five per cent. The weather report . . ."

Before he could finish his sentence, Metcalfe had leapt down from the aircraft, and was walking towards the administrative block. Gregory hurried behind him.

"Any other news, Bill?"

"No sir, nothing. Except old Huberton . . ."

"Don't let him bother you."

"Well, he's telephoned me three times. Something about his dog."

Metcalf stopped and began to laugh. "Good Lord—I promised to bring his dog back. You're a dog lover, aren't you Bill?"

"We keep a couple—terrier and spaniel."

"Good. I thought of bringing Medor back on the broccoli run."

"I don't understand, sir."

"Well, if I bring Huberton's dog back with me from Marseilles—crated in one of the cans or stuck in one of the car-boots—will you distract Her Majesty's Customs while we bring him in?"

Gregory looked at him in astonishment. "You pulling my leg?"

"No. I mean it."

"He'll bark—he won't take it."

"I'll deal with that."

Gregory shrugged his shoulders. "Up to you, sir. They don't look much on Thursdays."

Metcalf laughed, excited by the sudden idea of going to Marseilles. "Ask the skipper to make some room for me—a hundred and ninety-six pounds. Tell him to off-load another two crates if he's windy!"

"Right you are," said Gregory. He had a puzzled expression on his face, and as he passed Miss Wallis, one of the clerks, he raised his eyebrows to her.

Metcalf telephoned to Laura from his office, but the line was engaged. Ten minutes later he tried again. The

line was still engaged. He wasn't displeased. He had tried to telephone and explain, and if he'd failed to do so, it wasn't his fault.

"Ready, sir?" Gregory asked.

"Coming," said Metcalfe. "Be a good chap, and tell my wife I've had to go to Marseilles."

"Yes, sir. . . . Passport all right?"

"Everything's fine. . . . See you Thursday night."

"There he goes," said Miss Wallis, standing with the General Manager as they watched Metcalfe on his way to the aircraft. "Impulsive, isn't he?"

"That's one way of putting it," said Gregory.

"But rather nice," Miss Wallis added.

Chapter Four

RUSSELL opened his catalogue again, and turned to Plate Eighty-four of the Fuseli Summer Exhibition. "Girl dancing with a tambourine—Zurich, Kunsthaus." He was hemmed in by the viewers who had gathered in a semi-circle around the drawing, and suddenly, although he had allowed himself an extra half-hour of time, he felt afraid that he might be delayed, and she might be gone.

"Well, well," a young man said behind him. "Didn't know you liked this stuff!"

"Hello, Lobb," Russell said. "Why aren't you working on Orders and Regulations?" It was the routine banter.

"Civil Servants too have souls—it's official—the Rt. Hon. Graham Elder said so the day before yesterday to the National Union of Teachers."

"I bet he began with the reservation—'in my personal view . . .'"

"As a matter of fact, he did. He was a Lloyd's broker, and he always gets in a lot of small type, so to speak. . . . You still on insurance?"

Lobb's sentences were synoptic.

"I still do some work for the companies. . . ." Russell

wanted to disengage himself from Lobb, and to make sure they didn't leave together.

"Seen The Nightmare"? he asked.

"No."

"It's the most frightening thing in the whole Exhibition"—he began to turn the leaves of the catalogue. "You know, although Fuseli was a contemporary of Blake, he's extraordinarily—" he continued to turn the pages as Lobb peered over his shoulder—"extraordinarily modern. Here it is—43—in the Third Room—'The Nightmare. Two women lie naked on a bed, the one in front starting horrified out of her sleep whilst a ghostly horseman disappears through the window'!"

"Well, well," said Lobb, his lip quivering. "Could happen anywhere. I think I'll go and have a look."

Outside on the steps the sun was hot and brilliant. Russell glanced at his watch, and seeing that it was only twenty minutes to one, withdrew into the shadowed area behind the Corinthian pillars. Since he had left Castelnau les Fleurs, his appointment with Laura, conceived half in frivolity, had become the central obsessive project of his existence. The weather in Rome hadn't been as hot as the forecast had said; by day he had studied the papers and attended the Enquiry on the air disaster near Ostia; at night he had been occupied with dinner parties and entertainments arranged by Monelli fu Carlo, the lawyers who were acting for the Italian Government. The entry in his diary for August 14th—"Royal Academy—one o'clock"—was a secret which he liked to examine in the afternoons

at the Palazzo Caracciolo when witness after witness came forward to repeat evidence already sworn on affidavit. "Royal Academy—one o'clock." He couldn't visualise Laura's face in detail, but the inscription evoked their walk up the hillside to the hotel, her quiet voice—"sound of flutes and soft recorders"—and her hand in the darkness of the terrace.

Always towards nightfall, his thoughts of her became more insistent till at last when he lay in his bedroom at the Hassler, looking down over the Spanish Steps, it was like a compulsive, insomniac homesickness. And in the aircraft after he had left Ciampino, it seemed to him that not since 1944 when he flew back to England after a year in Italy had he felt the same mingling of excitement and hope and panic lest he be killed before he could return—before the hours became minutes and the minutes became seconds and the dream became the reality of coming home.

From time to time, taxis and cars drew up in the courtyard of Burlington House, and Russell waited expectantly for the blurred figures to emerge as Laura. An old woman with a poodle. A famous actor. Another old woman with blue hair. Disappointed and restless, he went into the hall, determined to wait till one o'clock had struck.

At ten to one, he came out again, and stood by a box of trailing geraniums. Suddenly in front of a pillar, he saw from his position at the side of the steps a head that was familiar. He could see the dark hair with its careful, fashionable cut, the slender, poised neck and, in half-profile,

Laura's face. He paused behind her. Her expression was solemn and anxious, and he could see that she was watching the taxis arriving; their indifference which previously had seemed to him excessive now seemed merely irrelevant. He felt exultant, flattered by her concern, by the uneasiness with which she looked from side to side, although the time of their appointment had not yet arrived.

"Good morning," he said.

She turned around quickly, and he took her hand in his.

"Hello," she said.

They stood like that and smiled to each other without moving.

"I was early," he said to her. "Half an hour."

"So was I," she replied. "How silly! I could have spent it with you."

"I'm staring at you," he said, "because I like it."

"Don't stop," she said.

"You're exactly as I remember you."

"Is that good or bad?"

"It's very good—very satisfactory. . . . Let's go and have lunch."

"Where?"

"L'Ambiance?"

"We'll meet all your friends. I thought . . ."

"It's quite normal. I often entertain there."

"Well, why did we meet here?"

"I wanted to meet you somewhere quiet—like this—so that I could be alone with you for a few minutes. Or would you prefer Les Ambassadeurs?"

She said, "Let's go to the Ambiance. It'll be fun. Tell me about Rome. . . ."

And as they walked along Piccadilly he spoke to her of

Rome, and looked at her face that he had tried to imagine so often; and she took his arm.

"You know so many people," Laura said when they were sitting at their table in the stone patio facing the Park. A man with white hair had just greeted him in passing.

"I know most of them," he said, "because I've either defended them or prosecuted them."

They looked around at the tables bright with young women in summer dresses attended in turn by middle-aged men in white shirts and dark suits, a foreground to the rococo façade of the Piccadilly mansion that contained the Ambiance Club.

"The Edwardian cycle is complete," said Russell. "This place used to belong to a family of bankers——"

"And now?"

"Now it belongs to the bank. There's a new aristocracy—the aristocracy of the Welfare State. . . ."

"I think it's fascinating—all these people are so different, but somehow they're all so stereotyped."

"They've got one thing in common. They've done well out of inflation. What would you like to eat?"

"You choose. . . . Something light. It's so hot."

He ordered cold chicken and salad and a Tavel.

"You're looking bewildered," said Russell.

"I am," Laura answered. "Who are these people? Explain it all to me."

"Well," said Russell, "where your left elbow is pointing—don't move—the one talking into his plate—that's Ponder. He's made several million pounds in the last eight years buying family businesses cheaply and selling them to the public—not so cheaply."

"And the pretty young woman?"

"That's his wife—he bought her fairly cheaply too."

"Oh, don't be horrid. She's sweet."

"It's still true."

"And over there?"

"By the fountain?"

"Yes—by the hamadryads."

Russell laughed.

"Why do you laugh?"

"You spoke about hamadryads when we were in France. I looked it up."

"Well?"

"It has an extra meaning of Abyssinian Batoon."

"That's right—that's what they look like. Who are they?"

"That lot? They're a congerie of film men subsidised by the Film Finance Corporation, Hedwiga Jones-Cobb, a model, Leigh-Parsons, a property man, and Pomfret-Baker of the Ministry of Works."

"Extraordinary!" said Laura. "They're *all* double-barrelled."

"That's it," said Russell. "Soon, the smart thing will be to have only one name,"

A light breeze was blowing and fluttering the pennants on the umbrellas above the tables.

"I like it here," said Laura. "I'm very happy here."

"And the people?"

"What people?" she asked. "I can't see anybody—nobody at all."

She smiled at him, and with his left hand he took her right hand in his under the table.

"All right," said Laura, "no more chicken. Let's just work on the salad. . . . Have I thanked you yet for arranging the interview for Roger?"

"It's not necessary. I was glad to. . . . Where is Roger?"

"He's in Marseilles. He telephoned me last night. He won't be back till tomorrow morning—I'm going to meet him at some unearthly hour. Half-past six."

"Good Lord!"

"It's all right. Christopher Huberton's driving down with me. He's been in touch with Roger. He's bringing his car back from Castelnau."

"Curious man, Huberton! I like him very much in spite of everything. . . . He's terribly isolated. Almost all his friends were wiped out in the First War, and since then, he's gone on just as if there'd been no history at all since 1918—his books, his pictures, Huberton—trying to recreate his dead friendships with young men—waking up from time to time to sell a few more of his assets."

"Poor Christopher! He's always been awfully sweet to me, but he can be dreadfully ruthless."

"I like seeing him and Medor. He's dotty about that animal."

Laura laughed and said to the waiter. "Coffee." Then to Russell, "Did you know Christopher during the war?"

"I met him casually. He turned Huberton over to the Navy as a convalescent home, and he himself ran part of it. He had some wonderful uniform of his own. It looked as though he'd designed it himself. But I believe it had something to do with the Red Cross."

"Where were you?" she asked.

"I—I was at the War Office for three years—reviewing Courts Martial. Then I had an easy year in Italy—reviewing Courts Martial. Then I was away for a bit and I finished up a brilliant military career at Whitehall—reviewing Courts Martial—with the rank of Major."

"Jolly good," said Laura. "I'm terribly impressed."

"I'm afraid I wasn't the real thing like Roger."

"Well," she said reflectively, crumbling a piece of toast Melba, "He did awfully well—most of the time, I suppose."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh nothing," she answered. "I'm sorry. Of course he did well. You can, I imagine, get a D.F.C. by surviving. But when you get a bar as well, it shows there's something deliberate about it."

"It does indeed," said Russell, and thinking of Metcalfe with his brevet and D.F.C. and bar, he felt a pang of mournful jealousy. When he looked up into her face, she was smiling to him and he felt her hand tighten around his.

"Tell me something about yourself," she said. "I've been reading *Who's Who* but that's very bleak. Educated Charterhouse and New College . . . Reform Club. *Who's Who* is like all autobiographies—its very concealing."

"What do you want to know?" Russell asked.

"Well, for example. . . . You're forty-one. Have you ever been engaged—or married?"

"Yes, both," He looked her straight in the face, and went on, "My wife was killed in an air-raid."

"I'm very sorry," she said formally, composing her features.

"It was when I was on night-duty at the War Office. . . . They were killed in rather sordid circumstances. He was a friend of mine."

"I see." She looked at him uncertainly.

"It's all right," he went on slowly. "Today for the first time I feel understanding—some understanding—for her, and compassion."

She had taken her hand away from him, and now she cupped her chin in her palms, and said, "I'm very glad. . . . Do you remember at Castelnau les Fleurs how Madame Nodier was speaking about the infinite shades between the limits of guilt and innocence? And how the things that seem so cut and dried, so black and white when one is young become blurred and obscure and doubtful as one gets older?"

"Well," said Russell, "some certainties disappear with time, and others that have come to seem like illusions begin to be real again."

"What sort of illusions?" Laura asked.

"I'm not quite sure," said Russell. Then he changed the tone of his voice, and said. "It's such a nice day. Would you like to drive into the country?"

"I'd love to," said Laura. "What a good idea. But I must be back by half-past six. I'm going to the theatre."

"Good!" said Russell. "I've got my car in Grosvenor Square. We'll go to Hardinger."

"What's that?"

"It's in Buckinghamshire. Would you like that?"

"I'd like it very much—very much indeed." She walked in front of him, serene and secure, and Russell watched contentedly the movement of heads that followed her passage.

They paused by the edge of the lake, and Russell put his foot on the stone parapet as they looked at the reeds and the slow assembly of ducks. The water was green with the reflection of the fir-trees that rose directly from the

edge to the crest of the slope, undisturbed except for the ephemeras and an occasional curling ripple that rose from the side and moved across the surface languidly and soundlessly.

Russell held her bare arm close against his side as they stared at the quiet lake.

"I think we must go," he said at last. "If you want to be back in time. . . ."

"Not yet, Stephen," she said. "Let's stay just a little longer. It's so peaceful and quiet here . . . so unlike London. Do you come here often?"

She looked at him anxiously, and with the back of his fingers he could feel the stir of her breast.

"No," he said. "I haven't been here for—oh, I don't know—twenty-five years—since I was a boy. We lived near here, and my father used to advise Hardinger . . . I wanted you to see it."

Her arm closed gratefully against his hand, pressing against her breast, a long, deliberate pressure, private and silent like a kiss, and he laid his face against hers.

"I thought so much about today," she said. "Every moment."

"What about Roger?"

"I don't know," she said, detaching herself from him, and looking away. They began to walk a foot apart from each other, along the lakeside path.

"Tell me about that," Russell said after a few minutes of silence. "It's important for me to understand."

"You mustn't think," Laura said, "that I'm a discontented wife in search of adventure."

"No," he said. "That wouldn't be flattering to me, and I hope it's not so."

"No, indeed it's not," she said. "I've been married a

long time—and I've never—really never looked at any other man."

"That's schoolgirl hyperbole," he said curtly. Suddenly it all seemed exaggerated. He felt as if he had put a foot on a trap-door of vanity, and had felt it sag.

"I think perhaps we ought to go back."

"Oh, no, not for a moment," she replied, and halted by the trunk of a fir-tree. "You must understand what I mean—I'm not as articulate as you—I use the words and phrases I'm familiar with—but you must understand. . . ."

"But of course I'll try," Russell said.

"I meant," said Laura, "that all these years I've accepted my marriage as important and stable. . . . There were the children. . . . But I can't pretend I've always been happy. I haven't been."

"Why not?"

"Why not? . . . How can I tell you? . . . I'll try one day—not now. . . . I was working at the Embassy in Paris before the war, having a brief, unsatisfactory affair with a French motor manufacturer. . . ."

"Go on."

"Yes, I will. I want you to know everything about me." She went on, "And then I met Roger—he was a member of the Air Mission in 1938. . . . I don't want to pretend. . . . I was drawn towards him—he was vigorous and eager and protective—and he made me feel safe."

"I see. And then?"

"Then we were married, and happy for a time. But I knew it wasn't really right. What I'd thought was vigour became violence—and the eagerness just insensitivity."

"But you felt safe."

"I felt safe—and now, I'm unsure—terribly unsure."

She leaned back against the tree trunk, and he put his

arms around her, and held her without speaking. All about them was a vast, peaceful silence. Even the murmur of traffic from the far-off road had ceased. He withdrew his face from hers for a moment, and saw that her eyes were shut. On her brow was a small frown.

He laid his face again on her warm cheek, and said, looking at the brown-red bark of the tree, "Tell me, Laura—tell me that you like me."

"I love you," she replied, "and I don't know what to do about it."

Chapter Five

“HORSE-MEAT,” said Huberton, “is, of course, the staple. But . . .” and he smiled to himself, “a dog like Medor couldn’t live on horse-meat alone. He’d get jaded.”

“Yes,” said Laura. “Isn’t everything beautiful and still?”

The airfield lay in an early morning quiet. The wind-sock rose and fell limply in the summer breeze. No engines were running, and apart from Laura and Huberton, the only other people in sight were two porters and a car-despatcher, standing near the Customs shed.

“I only hope,” said Huberton, “they’ve been giving him his egg and milk at night. I told Jean-Paul . . . I gave him ten thousand francs.”

“He’s very reliable,” said Laura.

“Well,” said Huberton grimly, “I’ll know as soon as I see Medor’s haunches. It’s very good of your husband to do this for me—very. I’ll always be grateful. Most chivalrous!”

They began to walk towards the No Admittance sign at the end of the apron.

“I’m not up very often at this hour of day,” said Laura.

"The last time I was up at six," said Huberton, "was when I stayed up all night—about forty years ago. Why've *you* come rushing out here?"

Hands in pockets, Laura drew her grey silk coat around her waist, and shrugged her shoulders. "It's a sort of habit. I've nearly always met Roger when he's come back from his trips. Usually he takes the second flight. . . . But I'm enjoying this. I don't often have such agreeable company."

She looked quickly at his worn, carefully shaved face and his pale blue eyes, trying to compensate with her formal compliment for a light distaste, uneasy in her complicity. He caught her glance, and bowed.

"How very kind you are, Laura! How very kind! And how fortunate Roger. . . ."

"Did you get those drawings?" she interrupted him.

"Only one," said Huberton regretfully. "Only one. I tried to buy the Baroccios—they went at £1,800 to one of the dealers. I tried the Tiepolos and a Pietro da Cortona—quite hopeless. Pictures nowadays aren't meant to be looked at. They're just negotiable assets that have fallen into the hands of the business-men."

"And what did you get in the end?"

"In the end," said Huberton contentedly, "I got a Fragonard drawing—a charming Italian garden—Tivoli, I imagine—that had slipped into the catalogue as 'after Hubert Robert'. I hope to describe it in the Burlington next month."

"Congratulations," said Laura. "They'll all be furious."

"Of course," said Huberton simply. "Of course. . . . To outwit the outwitters is one of my chief delights. . . . Poor old Medor! I hope he isn't getting bumped about—poor old chap!"

"Oh, no," Laura reassured him. "He's probably having those wonderful anaesthetised dreams . . . delicious smells, great hunks of meat . . ."

"Whisked-up eggs . . ."

"Yes, in milk . . ."

"With cognac . . ."

"He drinks, does he?"

"In moderation . . . when he's had a hard day."

Huberton smiled at Laura, and she decided that on balance she liked him. At that moment, they heard the sound of an aeroplane burring in the sky as it circled the area, losing height before landing.

"Here they are," said Huberton, looking up.

"Yes," said Laura, "I suppose they are."

"Right, sir!" the Customs officer called to Metcalfe who was leaning against the door of a yellow, 1932 Rolls Royce near the ramp of the aircraft from which three other cars had already been trundled out. They waited, bonnet open, for checking.

"O.K., Fred," said Metcalfe, and as he reversed the car, he gave him a friendly wave.

"Hello, Roger, good trip?" Huberton asked, peering beyond him into the back of the car.

"Yes, thanks," said Metcalfe, turning to Laura. He hesitated for a moment, and she said, "Hello, darling. I'm glad to see you back." Then he smiled, kissed her warmly and abruptly on the cheek, and said in her ear, "Sorry, darling."

"It's all right," said Laura. "I was worried about you not having your toothbrush."

"I bought one in Marseilles," said Metcalfe, and he put his arm affectionately on her shoulder.

"Medor . . ." Huberton began.

"I think we'd better get out of here first," said Metcalfe.

"Laura—you bring your car along. We'll go ahead."

"How far?" Laura asked.

"We'll turn left at Stubb's Wood," said Metcalfe, "and stop this side of the railway line."

Huberton climbed in next to Metcalfe, and the cars set off together.

"I'm infinitely grateful to you, Roger," said Huberton, "particularly as I feel as if I'm compounding a felony."

"You are," said Metcalfe, accelerating as they passed the gates. "It's amazing how these old cars can get away."

"This car," said Huberton, "has the virtue of antique craftsmanship. . . . How did he take the journey?"

"Slept like a babe. I heard him snoring."

Huberton settled back happily against the upholstered seat, and said, "It's the way their noses are shaped. It gives them a permanent catarrh. . . . I hope he has no ill after-effects."

"Shouldn't think so," said Metcalfe, turning down a side road. "Boxers are pretty tough."

"Well," said Huberton. "I'm really most obliged to you, Roger. These quarantine regulations are absurdly rigid. They're a product of our insular arrogance. . . . You did give him a feed after you telephoned last night?"

"No," said Metcalfe. "Dr. Borchard wasn't keen on him having anything with the injection."

"How did he take it?" Huberton asked. His brow had a pucker of concern.

"Beautifully," Metcalfe answered with a rapid glance in the driving-mirror to make sure that Laura was still following him. He put out his hand, and gave her a "thumbs-up" sign.

"Yes," he said, returning to Huberton. "He took it beautifully. He licked the doctor's hand."

"Did anybody ask——"

"Oh, no. They all knew Medor was having an injection—for distemper."

"Well, as long as he's not sick when he comes round, it's all very satisfactory."

Metcalfe was now driving slowly, looking for a gap in the hedge. "I'll back into that next field," he said, "and we'll get Medor out of the boot."

"Poor beast!" said Huberton. "He travelled out like a gentleman on his own seat. And here he is—brought home in the boot as if he were a piece of luggage."

Without answering, Metcalfe stopped the Rolls Royce, leapt out and waved Laura's car to a standstill.

"Well," he said, "here we are. The great unveiling! And I've brought you some roses from Grasse."

"You are sweet," she said. "Where are they?"

"In the boot with Medor. I must admit that they were a spot of camouflage as well. When Fred asked me what was in the boot, I tipped it half open, showed him the flowers, and said, 'Flowers for the wife.'"

"Most ingenious," said Huberton impatiently. "Shall we perhaps release Medor?"

"Yes, do let's," said Laura.

Metcalfe twisted the handle of the heavy boot, but it wouldn't turn. He tried a second time, and a vein in the

centre of his forehead swelled with his effort. Huberton looked on anxiously.

"What about unlocking it?" said Laura, and they all laughed with relief as Metcalfe sheepishly unlocked the boot and raised its heavy lid.

A cascade of yellow roses, bursting from their cellophane wrapping, fell onto the dusty stubble of the field.

"Heavens," said Laura, kneeling to pick them up. "I could open a flower shop."

Through the trellis of the remaining roses, they could see Medor stretched out languidly, his brown body with its fawn-pink underbelly voluptuously relaxed.

"Isn't he a darling?" said Laura. "Let me get the flowers out of the way."

Metcalfe, hands on hips, watched as Huberton crouched down and called, "Medor. . . Out you come, boy! . . . Medor!"

Only a few roses still straggled on the floor; the rest, bundled out by Laura, lay piled on the ground by the G.B. plate.

"Come on, Medor," Huberton said again.

"Sleeping it off," said Metcalfe with a chuckle.

"Medor," Huberton pleaded. "Come on, old boy."

The dog lay immobile, and Huberton's face became white as he straightened himself. "Something's wrong," he said. "I think you'd better help me to get him out."

Metcalfe bent down, and began to drag Medor by the collar.

"Don't drag him," Huberton said in a high, angry voice. "Lift him!" He took Medor under the shoulders while Metcalfe lifted the rump, and together they lowered the heavy animal to the ground.

"Now, don't get excited," Metcalfe said. "Don't get excited, man," he said more loudly to Huberton. "Take a walk. He'll be running around in a few minutes."

"No, he won't," said Huberton, kneeling down beside the dog, and wiping the slaver from his flews. "No, he won't . . . there's something wrong."

"Nonsense," said Metcalfe; but he hurriedly knelt and put his hand beneath Medor's leg. Both men were sweating in the hot sun, and Laura felt her heart begin to beat more urgently.

"Roger," she said, peering over their shoulders, "there is something wrong. Let's get him to a vet—quickly, darling."

"There can't be anything wrong," said Metcalfe, pressing his fingers into the dog's flesh. "Come on, Medor," he shouted harshly. "Up you get!"

"It's no good," said Huberton, staring into Metcalfe's face. "It's no good shouting. . . . Look at the ants!"

And when Laura and Metcalfe looked down, they saw a busy procession of ants leading from the sun-baked soil beneath the roses across Medor's flank to his mouth.

Metcalfe raised himself slowly to his feet. "I'm terribly sorry, Christopher," he said. "I wish . . ."

"It wasn't a good idea," said Huberton, brushing the ants away with the back of his hand.

Then he got to his feet, his knee-caps grey with dust, and began to walk away across the field.

"It wasn't a good idea," they heard him repeat.

Before he had gone twenty yards, Laura, who had stood indeterminately beside the dog, came running behind him.

"Oh, Christopher, I'm deeply sorry," she said. "I'm so . . ."

Huberton began to walk faster, stumbling over the ruts. When Laura caught him up again, she saw that he was crying, silently and desperately.

"Christopher . . ." she started to say.

"No," he said between his sobs. "No . . . go away. He killed him . . . he killed . . . my . . . dog."

"What would you like, Mrs. Cordery? Gin and something—a long one?" Roger asked. Around them, in the interval of "The Two Duennas", there was a polite pressure, and unrelenting thrust towards the wet counter, a wave of money at the barmaids who were serving with an arbitrary though energetic nonchalance.

"Another brandy and soda," said Mrs. Cordery. As the wife of Victor Cordery, the managing director of Mediterranean Airlift Ltd., she required a special respect from Metcalfe. She was one of those middle-aged, fair-skinned women in whom alcohol rises like a red tide, first darkening the neck, then mottling the cheeks and at last, triumphant, making the forehead itself blush.

"You, Laura?"

"Nothing, thanks."

"Victor?"

"Whisky and soda, please."

Within a few seconds, Metcalfe had reached the bar. While others waited, he moved. While they made gestures and tried with half-smiles to woo from the barmaids what they couldn't command, Metcalfe called out his order, and began to clear a space for the glasses.

"He buys his drinks like a rugger forward going for the line," said Cordery. Through symbiosis, he and his wife had acquired a similar complexion, a similar droop of the jowls, a similar cadence in their voices. They had lived in Malta for many years, and visited London as if it were a foreign capital.

"What's that?" said Laura, interrupted in her thought of Stephen.

"He played rugger for the R.A.F.," said Mrs. Cordery. "Don't you remember him telling us?"

"No, I don't," said Cordery. "In fact, I don't think he did."

"Of course he did. Going down to Farnborough. Really, Victor . . ."

"Well, I simply don't remember. I see no crime in that. . . ."

They had begun to bicker again, and Laura said, "Don't you think Patricia Low is awfully good?"

"A bit obvious," said Mrs. Cordery. "I can't imagine that a really good actress would need such a deep décolleté. . . ."

"Well, old girl, you've got to have something in the shop window," said Cordery, and burst out laughing.

"What's the joke?" asked Metcalfe, returning with the drinks. Cordery repeated what his wife had said, and his own observation.

"Very good, very good," said Metcalfe, forcing himself to laugh professionally.

"Don't you like Restoration comedy?" Laura asked Mrs. Cordery, who, irritated by her husband's humour, had swallowed her brandy as if it were vodka.

"No," said Mrs. Cordery. She paused while she allowed

the drink to disperse through her alimentary tract. "I don't like Restoration comedy. It's vulgar."

"Shocking bit," said Cordery, "where old—what's his name—Sir Humphrey Friggley gets the girl to put him on . . ." he began to laugh . . . "on reins" . . . his laughter became a guffaw . . . "and she whips him . . ." he could scarcely go on, and the people nearby turned to look at him in amusement . . . "and whips him round the . . . the sofa!"

His laughter had become uncontrollable; the glass of whisky shook in his hand and splashed over his dinner jacket; his face, already congested, turned a deep mauve; he was choking with his own imagination. At first, Metcalfe and Laura laughed too, but then they saw the expression on Mrs. Cordery's face. Her embarrassment as her husband coughed and whooped had changed to concern as his breathing, through the ingestion of whisky into the trachea, became a painful whistle.

"Now then . . ." said Metcalfe, and began to pat Cordery gently on the back.

"Get him a glass of water," an American woman with an off-the-shoulder black dress suggested.

A barmaid rushed from her station with a chair, and they gathered around Cordery, still whooping and whistling, as they tried to sit him, resistant, down.

In the middle of the confusion, the curtain-bell began to ring. A St. John's Ambulance man now appeared, and dropping on one knee, started to unpack his medicaments.

"Space, please," he said simply. The audience began gratefully to disperse. Only the barmaids stayed rooted by their private drama.

But as soon as the second bell stopped, Cordery, who had succeeded in whistling away the intrusive alcohol,

reverted to normal. Wiping his watering eyes, he said "That will do," to the Ambulance man who was trying to take his pulse, and added with cold dignity, "We'd better be getting back. I believe I heard the bell."

Behind Cordery's head, Metcalfe smiled to Laura and she smiled back to him. They had no need of language; they knew each other very well, and all they had to say about Cordery was contained in their smile.

"Yes, let's not miss the beginning," said Mrs. Cordery. She spoke gently. The flush had died from her face, and she took her husband's arm.

"I'll be with you in a moment," said Laura, squeezing Metcalfe's hand. "You go on, and see that their chocolates don't go down the wrong way."

The telephone-bell burred three times, and then a woman's voice answered.

"I want to speak to Mr. Russell," Laura said. She could hear other voices, as if from a room at the end of a corridor.

"Who are you?" The question was formal but touched with insolence, and Laura replied, "I want to speak to Mr. Russell personally."

"Well, just a moment. I'll see if I can tear him away."

Laura looked from the booth towards the curtains which the attendants were drawing across the theatre doors, half-regretting the compulsion that made her telephone Russell, yet certain that had she not done so, she would again have wakened towards morning with her burden of longing made heavier by fear and uncertainty.

"Stephen," she said when she heard him say "Hello!" with a slight exasperation in his voice. "Darling, it's me—Laura."

His voice became filled with pleasure.

"Hello, Laura," he said. "Where are you?"

"I'm at the theatre. I had to talk to you. I've had such a grisly day. Are you angry with me for ringing?"

"No—delighted."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm entertaining a few bores. I asked them in for drinks at six, and they won't go away."

"Is there anyone there I wouldn't like?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean are there any women there whom I'd think a menace?"

"About three."

"Oh!"

Within her flippancy she felt a stone of pain. She heard him laugh, and he went on. "There's no one in the world who could menace you, Laura—no one at all."

"What about the woman who answered the 'phone?"

"She? That's Mrs. Topliss. She looks after me, and at this moment—I suspect she's coming to tell me there's no more whisky."

Laura listened to their brief factual conversation about the *canapés* that the housekeeper had prepared, and then said, "Are you sure it's all right—I mean tomorrow?"

"Quite certain. I'll pick you up at Burlington House. . . . Unless you've changed your mind."

"No," she said quickly, "No."

"Good," he replied. "Darling . . ."

"Yes."

"I think my guests are clamouring."

"All right, Stephen. . . . It's just that I don't want to let you go."

"Have you had a good evening?"

"No—awful."

"I'm glad. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Good-bye, darling."

She heard him put the receiver down with a slow, light touch. Then, smiling to herself, she hurried over the carpet through the swing doors and into the darkened theatre, her private elation echoing in the tumult of laughter that moved in bright waves from the stalls to the gallery as Sir Humphrey Friggley began a new *manège* with his strumpets.

While Laura was brushing her hair in front of the dressing-table, Roger came behind her and put his hands on her bare shoulders. After the theatre they had dined at the Aiglon, and they were gay with the relief of having left the Corderys.

"What a dreary woman," Laura said.

"Maddening!" said Metcalfe. "Did you see how she tucked into the sea-food?"

Laura remembered the pile of discarded claws and shells on Mrs. Cordery's plate, and said, "No, darling. It makes me slightly sick. . . . Is Cordery going to do anything?"

"Yes. He's going to write to the Ministry saying we're the only firm equipped—really equipped—for their contract."

"That's good, isn't it?"

Laura stood, and turned to him, her face bright with tenderness. "I'm so glad, darling," she said. It was a long time since she had seen his mouth relaxed, without the hard droop of defeat or closed, inarticulate defiance.

He drew her towards him, and said, "Thank you, Laura. . . . Thank you for being patient with me. . . . I hope things are going to be better."

She kissed his cheek, and drew away from him.

"Oh, that's all right, Roger . . . I know—don't talk about it. . . . You've had so much strain. And Medor on top of it all."

She got into bed, and watched him as he drew the curtains. He was humming to himself an old R.A.F. song, "Up-she-goes, up-she-goes, up-she-goes-in-the-sky-Ho!" which he used to sing whenever he was cheerful and a little drunk.

Although it was nearly one o'clock, the sky had the lightness of a summer dusk; the half-moon combined with the street-lamps to throw a lilac light into the room.

"What a wonderful night!" said Metcalfe, standing at the window and inhaling the air with slow, deep breaths.

"Wonderful!" said Laura. She thought as she looked at her husband of the many times she had seen him standing there, looking out onto the street, precisely as he stood there now. And it all seemed normal and habitual and Stephen a strange, unreal imagining.

"What happened to Medor in the end?" she asked. Until that moment, she hadn't given a thought to the disposal of the dog.

"We put him in the furnace," said Metcalfe, drawing the last curtain of a side window. "We had to do something. Huberton wouldn't say anything sensible or coherent."

“How sad it all is!” said Laura. “Poor Medor!” Then she added, “Poor Roger!”

Metcalfé climbed into the bed, and for two or three minutes they lay in silence, side by side.

“Laura!” he said at last. He stretched out his hand, and touched her face and her breast and her thigh. She hesitated; then she turned towards his familiar presence.

Chapter Six

WHEN Russell arrived at the Central Lobby, Bewsher was already waiting. He stood under the cupola, his thumb in his waistcoat pocket, his right foot extended, reproducing in his attitude the marble pose of the statue behind him. The Lobby was clustered with two deputations, one of Nigerians, the other of farmers, who surrounded attentively and as if for enlightenment, a number of defensive Members. From time to time, they would interrupt their absorption as the policeman at the barrier in a fulminating roll-call announced the names of the Members who couldn't be found. But Bewsher was wearing his ministerial manner, and the stragglers from the deputations, though they circled, didn't risk approaching him.

"I must say," said Russell, shaking hands with Bewsher, "you look like a good girl in a gold-rush town."

"That's it," said Bewsher. "Protected by my virtue. Someone did come up and ask if I was a Member. I denied it. Frankly, I never see the purpose of these mass lobbies. As far as I can see, their only point is to remind us that we're demagogues. Shall we go into dinner straight away?"

They walked together towards the Strangers' Dining Room with Bewsher distributing salutes ranging from nods to bows, and graduated according to the importance of their recipients.

"It's quite absurd—this September session," he said. "The trouble is the Opposition lives on war-talk and crises. And when there isn't one, they make it seem as if there is by having the P.M. recall Parliament. Telegrams, trunk-calls, cables—hello, Geoffrey!" He interrupted himself to give a gentle, warming smile to a short man in a dark suit standing by the bust of Oliver Cromwell in the Inner Lobby.

"Who's that?" Russell asked. "I see him all over the place."

"Gogarty!" said Bewsher respectfully. "Very important fellow. . . . Runs that T.V. programme—what's it called?—hello, Tom!" He patted an elderly Trade Unionist benevolently on the arm as he passed him. "How's it going?"

"Ay! ay!" came the summary reply.

Sitting by the window looking out across the river towards St. Thomas's Hospital, Russell began to wonder when he could leave Bewsher who throughout the meal had rehearsed on him a forthcoming speech. Bewsher's invitation had been short and imperative. "Come and dine with me at the House next Thursday at 7.30. There's something I'd like to discuss with you." And now, when Russell was already thinking of leaving, Bewsher still had said nothing which required discussion; he had

complained about his Minister and about the Kitchen Committee and about the Emergency Session and about his pairing difficulties. But he had given no hint of any special reason for this social summons.

"Tell me, Bewsher," Russell said at last. "You wanted to talk to me about something specific. Is that right?"

"Like a brandy?"

"No, thanks."

"A Hine 1900? Very good here."

"All right."

Bewsher ordered the brandies, and then, stroking the glass, said, "Look here Russell. I'll put it to you frankly. . . . We're having a bit of bother with Metcalfe—"

"Roger Metcalfe?"

"That's it. He's a trouble-maker—a man with an obsession. Now in the normal way I wouldn't worry about the fellow . . . we're used to nuisances."

Russell watched the lamps on the terrace bloom with light as Bewsher spoke, and he said, "Pretty, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Bewsher. "But he's got rather tiresome in the last few days."

"You mean that article—'New Crichel Down case—D.F.C.'s licence withheld'?"

"That's only part of it. I don't mind that. Every time someone's caught offside, they'll always want to shoot the ref. It isn't that. The trouble is Metcalfe's got hold of Wakelin, and he's put three questions down for the week after next."

"Well?"

"Well, I want to be able to say—and I've spoken to the Minister about it—I want to be able to say that I've had the papers looked at by an eminent legal authority—a specialist in the forensic aspects of aviation—and that

this and that"—he picked up a knife for 'this' and a fork for 'that'—"is my conclusion. See what I mean?"

"I think I do," Russell looked cautiously at Bewsher, who had begun to peel a pear. Then he shook his head.

"I don't think it would do. You see, I've acted for the insurance companies against Metcalfe—in a sense, at any rate."

"I know all about that. You advised them and investigated for them. That's not the same as acting against Metcalfe."

"That's quite true."

"The difficulty of dealing with Metcalfe's case is that the Court of Enquiry gave him a clean bill."

"Why should that be a difficulty?"

"It is a difficulty," Bewsher said thoughtfully, "because the reports only tell half the story."

He opened a cream-coloured folder with the heading "Civil Aircraft Accident: Report of the Court Investigation on the accident to Nightfreighter A-BZGA" and turned the pages to a section entitled Questions and Answers.

"Listen to this," he said. He mumbled through a few paragraphs till he said, "Here we are: 'The Court's answers to the questions submitted by the Attorney-General are as follows. . . . Was the aircraft loaded and trimmed within the specified limits set out in the Certificate of Airworthiness when it left Bostock? Answer: Yes.'"

"Seems good enough," said Russell.

"It would be," said Bewsher, "If we didn't have information that Metcalfe had been consistently overloading. One of his pilots—fellow called Andrews—Metcalfe sacked him for refusing to fly when he thought

he'd done enough—he's given us some very interesting information."

"I can't imagine the Minister would base his decision on the tale-telling of a disgruntled employee."

"Not on that alone. But we do happen to know that even if Metcalfe got away with it at the Court, he's still got a sort of constructive guilt. He'd kept his chaps on the hop for months—he's still doing it. He pushes them to the limit, and then he thinks we're persecuting him."

"Are you?" Russell asked.

"No," Bewsher replied emphatically. "No, we're not. We've been leaning over backwards to try and help him. It's no joke taking away the flying-licence of a man with Metcalfe's record. I think he did two tours in Bomber Command. . . . No. That's not the point. The real point is whether we can risk—not Metcalfe's life—that's literally his own business—we don't want him to risk other people's lives."

Russell nodded in agreement.

"Imagine what would happen," Bewsher went on, "if we gave Metcalfe his licence back, and next week there's a crash. I can see the headline—'New Nightfreighter crash—Crew of six dead.'"

"Minister attacked at Question Time," said Russell.

"That's it—Resignation of Parliamentary Secretary—I don't like it."

"But with a doctor's certificate—so to speak——"

"Yes—I prefer to call it an anticipatory absolution."

"Does it matter that I put Metcalfe in touch with you the other day?"

"Indeed it does. It proves you're unbiased." Bewsher was smiling boyishly. "You've been the perfect neutral, Russell. We'd like you to do it."

Russell hesitated before answering. "I have another slight doubt," he said. "I know the Metcalfes socially and I'm not sure . . . my prejudices, on the whole, are in their favour. I like them."

"That's splendid," said Bewsher, looking at the clock. "It's a further guarantee of your impartiality. You can be quite sure that if we agree with your conclusions, we'll take your advice at once." He smiled, and stabbed the pear with his knife. "Too soft," he said. "We really ought to have a revolution. I'd turn out the Kitchen Committee lock, stock and barrel."

The annunciator on the wall began to rattle out the name of a new speaker, and everyone in the dining-room turned to look at the words that were being spelled out. They were, "Minister of Supply."

"Good Lord!" said Bewsher. "I've got to be on the bench. What d'you say, Russell?"

"All right," said Russell decisively. "Send me the papers to my Chambers."

"So pleased," said Bewsher, signing the bill. "I'll get my secretary to telephone you to-morrow."

They rose, and began to walk between the tables to the door.

"Incidentally," said Bewsher, "Is there any truth in the story about Hoyland?"

"What story?"

"Now then," said Bewsher, taking Russell's arm. "Don't be coy. Is it true they've asked you to stand for Hoyland?"

Russell disengaged his arm, and laughed. "It's fantastic," he said. "I only had the letter this morning. The Westminster tom-toms must have been working overtime. . . . It's only tentative. The Chairman——"

"If Coghill wrote to you, you can be sure it's more than tentative. He holds that Party in the palm of his hand—like an American millionaire with his baseball team."

"I don't know," said Russell coldly. He wanted to get away from Bewsher's comprehensive disparagements.

"Well, you can take it from me. The only thing you've got to be careful about is the Nonconformist vote . . ."

"You'll ask your secretary to ring me."

". . . they can sway it. . . ."

"It might be better if you send me the papers by hand."

"But if you're ready to give up whisky and cigars and all that"—Bewsher giggled a little—"you're there for life. . . . All right, old chap. Thank you so much for coming."

Russell shook hands with him and walked rapidly across the Central Lobby.

In St. James's Park, there were still crowds sauntering in the warm night. Russell joined them, content to be identified with the anonymous faces moving in two opposite drifts through the darkness by the lakeside.

Since breakfast when he had received his letter from Coghill, the Chairman of the Hoyland Divisional Association, he had felt that a new phase had begun in his career. If, in fact, the sitting Member who was already seventy-four were to retire as had been proposed to him with "delicate insistence"—those were Coghill's words—before the next session, then indeed it seemed certain that the Selection Conference would merely be a formality. Someone had said that Hoyland was the last of the

Pocket Boroughs. Certainly, Coghill dominated the Association with almost as much authority as any nineteenth-century peer with a constituency in his gift. The seat had traditionally been held by a lawyer, and for the last twenty-five years with Liberal support, the successful candidate had never had a majority of less than twelve thousand.

Russell did arithmetic in his mind as he walked. Even if the Party lost a third of its votes in an apathetic by-election, the majority was still secure. He wondered if it would mean that he would have to see less of Laura. But that was an academic speculation. The reality was Coghill's letter that he carried in his breast-pocket.

He stumbled over the feet of a pair of lovers on a bench, and apologised.

Assuming that he was elected in March! Crawe-Welby, the Attorney-General, couldn't last long. His speeches in Committee during the Monopoly debates had been described by the *Telegraph* as "a series of stuttering ineptitudes." Sir Francis Hocking, the Solicitor-General was notoriously anxious to return to private practice. Who were left? Loder, Privett, Llewellyn-Maddox, Godstone and Black. They had made such reputations as they enjoyed through the publicity of their membership of the House rather than their legal skill. There wasn't one of them to whom in his profession he would not have been preferred by any of the Departments. Sir Stephen Russell. He liked the rhythm. Sir Stephen Russell, Q.C. It tripped. The Attorney-General, Sir Stephen Russell. The Solicitor-General, Sir Stephen Russell. He liked the sound, and spoke it aloud.

He began to walk faster in time to the thought, intending to cross the ornamental bridge to his club in Pall Mall.

But Laura! The night yawned ahead of him like many

others in the last ten years. He would have gone to his club—perhaps have telephoned Bevington or Rosamond Taylor or Mary Larsen or one of the others and then studied briefs or read papers before going to bed at one in the morning. He had no wish to renew the old pattern of his life. Like an undertone to every thought, he heard Laura's voice, gentle and remote; and her face, in all that he did, even when he was talking to Bewsher, was present to him wherever he went. Her voice was the first sound he heard on waking, her face the first sight he saw; he fell asleep with them in his memory.

She had told him that she was going that evening with Metcalfe and a party of business friends to the Ambiance and had asked Russell to meet them there afterwards. He had refused. He wanted never again to meet Metcalfe and Laura together on a social occasion. "There's a limit," he said, "even to hypocrisy." And she had shrugged her shoulders and said, "If it's one more way—an extra chance—of seeing each other!"

And suddenly, Russell said to himself, "Why not?" He wanted to see her with an urgent longing that affected him like the demand of a vice, and when he called a taxi that had just become free in the Mall, he felt the release of one who surrenders himself to an addiction.

"Americans—those were," said the taxi-driver, pointing back to his four late passengers who were standing on the kerb.

"Oh, yes," said Russell.

"Unpredictable!" the taxi-driver shouted through the glass partition when Russell had given him the address of the Ambiance. "With them it's either ten bob tip or a tanner."

"Yes," said Russell.

"That lot," shouted the taxi-driver after a pause, "that was a tanner lot. Americans. Don't like 'em."

"Some Americans are very nice," said Russell carefully.

"I'll grant you that," the taxi-driver replied, "but I don't like 'em. . . . Mind you, I'm not xenophobic."

"What's that?" Russell asked, imagining that he had misheard.

"Xenophobic," said the driver "X-e-n-o-"

"Yes, of course," said Russell quickly. The taxi-man, satisfied with his curtain-line, fell into silence, and Russell, anxious to be liked that evening, set aside in his pocket a half-crown tip.

With a sense of guilt as if he were looking unobserved through someone's window, Russell sat on a high stool in the corner of the bar and looked into the restaurant. Pressed close to him so that he could hardly raise his glass without nudging them was a party of young men and women who had come from the theatre and were waiting for a table. The men were repeating the jokes that had pleased them; the girls were looking around to see whom they knew; and every now and again, the distressed host of the party, clutching the shawl collar of his dinner jacket, returned with a report about the table situation. "He says another five minutes." And the others in unison, "But tell him we're hungry," and loud laughter.

Inside the restaurant, those already at supper had the satisfied air of possession, the clamour of their conversation swallowing up the music till all that survived was a vague thump-thump through the din of voices. The dance-floor, narrowed by encroaching tables, was full.

The men glistened; the women, most of them in black and with uniform coiffures, looked happy.

Russell paid the bill, and made his way to the head-waiter who was standing at the entrance to the restaurant.

"Hello, Farkas," he said, looking past him at the tables.

"Good evening, Mr. Russell," said the head-waiter. "Have you reserved a table?"

"No. I'm not going to stay. I'm looking for some friends."

"Can I help you?"

In that moment, Russell saw, almost simultaneously, Metcalfe laughing and talking to an elderly but expensively dressed woman, and Laura, looking ahead of her with a lonely, melancholy air.

"Can I help you?" the waiter repeated. And Russell answered, "No thanks, Don't worry. They're not here."

Laura had seen him. Her eyes, sombre and blank, had become bright with happy recognition.

Russell returned to the bar, and a few seconds later, Laura came out, looked around in search of him, and then came straight towards the tapestried arm-chair beneath the carved woodwork where he was sitting. He rose, and took her hand quickly.

"Forgive me," he said. "I wanted to look at you for ten seconds. I'm going now."

"Oh, darling," Laura said, her face illuminated with delight. "Don't go. Not yet. I slipped away. I said . . ."

"Never mind," said Russell, "I'll talk to you for two minutes."

"How was your evening?"

"It was adequate—but I was distracted. I thought of you the whole time."

They spoke urgently, smiling to each other with their

public expressions as if they were talking about some new film. She looked quickly over her shoulder and said. "Has anything interesting been happening?"

"I've been asked to act for the Anglo-Levant Oil Company—it may mean going to Iraq for a few weeks."

Her smile disappeared, and she said, "But—oh, Stephen. That will be unbearable. And besides, it might be dangerous. It was dreadful after I left Castelnau—and that was before——"

"Don't you want me to go?"

"No."

"It's a most valuable brief," he said provokingly.

"I still don't want you to go."

"I'm glad," Russell answered. "I've already turned it down."

She smiled to him in relief and said, "I'd like to put my arms around you in front of everyone so that everyone—the whole world—will know I love you."

"That wouldn't do at all," said Russell. "You're talking, Laura, to a prospective candidate—a Parliamentary candidate."

"Good Lord, tell me all about it."

He told her briefly about Coghill's letter, and her face became worried again.

"It won't take you away from me," she asked. "Will it?" and rather more anxiously, "will it?"

"No," said Russell, "Of course not. . . . Mind you, we may have to be rather more careful."

"I don't want to be careful," said Laura emphatically. "I don't want to be."

"Well," said Metcalfe, who had come up behind her. "I don't know what you don't want to be, Laura, but you'd better be getting back to Lady Vernon. She's

beginning to judder." And then angrily, "You've been away a long time, you know; it's damn rude."

"Good evening, Metcalfe," said Russell. "How are you?"

"Hello, Russell," Metcalfe answered brusquely, his face red with drink and irritation. "You mustn't encourage Laura to neglect her duties. God knows she doesn't need any outside help. . . ."

"Have a drink while you're here," Russell suggested.

"No, thanks," said Metcalfe, "I'm busy." Then with a self-deprecating grin, "We're selling freight to old Vernon, and it's hard work. I've danced with his wife twice."

Laura said, "Good night. I hope we'll see you again soon."

Metcalfe, who was holding her arm tightly so that where his fingers entered her flesh they made white marks with red surrounds, turned back to Russell and said, "And by the way, I won't be troubling you any more about the licence. I've put Wakelin on the job."

Russell laughed and said, "That's splendid."

"I don't think we ever thanked Stephen for arranging the interview with Bewsher," said Laura.

Metcalfe in a voice of uncontrolled rage that made the barman and those near him turn their heads, shouted, "Don't you teach me how to behave, you—you—"

He flung her arm aside, and almost ran back to the restaurant.

"I'm sorry, Stephen," said Laura. "I'm so sorry. . . . He gets like that. He isn't really very well . . . I think I'd better . . ."

Her voice trailed away, and she followed behind Metcalfe to his table.

Chapter Seven

“**W**HAT’s the time?” he asked. And she replied “Not yet, my darling.” Then they lay there with the sliver of sunlight piercing an untidy point between the drawn curtains and making her face and neck visible to him.

“What can you see?” he asked. He felt her fingers stir against his upper arm, and she said, her eyes closed and shadowed, “I can see lovely things—very beautiful things.”

Her voice was languid and trailing.

“What can you see?” he repeated.

“I can see submarine landscapes—weeds—blue-green weeds and sea-anemones. . . . It’s lovely. . . . They’re floating and drifting and waving—like hair. . . .”

“Go to sleep,” he said, and moved his left hand over the rivulet of sweat below her throat.

“No,” she said, half-opening her eyes, and looking at the ceiling. “I don’t want to sleep. There’s so little time.”

He raised himself against her side, and put his arm around her shoulders while she turned and placed her head on his chest. After a few moments, she slept.

Naked, she seemed smaller than in the street or in restaurants or on the beach at Castelnau where she moved in a fashionable conformity even of height. Her face, bare of lipstick, was pale; a strand of hair had fallen over her forehead; and she slept like an exhausted swimmer who has reached a shore.

Against his body in the circle of his arm, her head was weighted and relaxed. Her breathing was the only sound in the room except for the precise tick of the clock and the intermittent grumble of traffic, remote, external.

Stephen watched her for a few minutes, and then he kissed the corner of her mouth.

"Laura!" he whispered.

She awoke suddenly, and said, "Darling—I've been asleep."

He smiled. "You've been asleep for three hours."

"No!" she said agitatedly. "What time is it?"

She sat up and looked at the watch on his wrist. Then she lay back in relief, and asked, "What time do you expect her back?"

"Not till eleven. It's her Mitcham day."

"I hate your housekeeper," said Laura.

"Why? She does her best."

"I hate her. I hate everyone who can look at you. . . . I don't want to go."

"What time's your dinner?"

"Eight o'clock. And afterwards we're going to meet Peter. He's arriving at Waterloo at half-past ten. You

know, darling, he's become absolutely mad about sailing—sailing and shooting."

"Oh, yes," said Russell, taking a cigarette from the box at the side of the bed. "Like to smoke?"

"No, thank you," said Laura. She was quite awake, and her face had a faint flush where it had lain against Russell's.

"He's become terribly big and brash in the last few months," Laura went on. "I do want you to meet him. He's nothing like me—nothing at all. He's got Roger's look—you know, a sort of March day look. You're never quite sure if it's going to be blustery or bright sunlight." She was smiling in recollection. "But he isn't really like Roger. I think Jennifer's much more like him in character. Peter's very gentle—terribly sweet and considerate. Did I tell you he sent me a pot of Devonshire cream from Salcombe?"

"No," said Russell, drawing at his cigarette.

"Roger wants to teach him to drive. He——" She saw his abstracted expression, and interrupted her sentence.

"I'm so sorry, Stephen. I've been prattling on about Peter. I'm boring you. . . ."

"No," he said slowly, putting the palm of his hand on her face. "You're not boring me. I want to know all these things. It's just that it's strange to think of you with an utterly private life in which I have no part."

Her eyes that had become luminous with pleasure when she spoke of her son, became sombre again.

"It isn't that," she said. "Not that at all. There's nothing I do or even think that isn't related to you somehow or other. And Peter . . . he's really my only problem. And Jenny too, I suppose."

She began to dress reluctantly while he continued to smoke in silence, thinking of Peter and of all her affections that reached into unfamiliar worlds. At last, she came and sat, the buttons of her dress still unfastened, on the edge of the bed beside him; and as he lay there, looking at her eyes that mirrored images and memories that he didn't know, a curious retrospective jealousy surged up in him.

"I wish," he said, "I wish we'd met years and years ago."

"Do you think it would have been all right?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "It would have been all right. I would have loved you whenever I'd met you in my life. But perhaps—" a doubt had fallen on his thought—"perhaps in those early years . . ."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I've told you all about that," she said. "Until I met you in Castelnau, I'd never given a thought to another man—never let anyone as much as hold my hand. All Roger's friends—all the compliments and flattery and cocktail-parties—even when I was on *Femina* for two years—there was never anything or anyone at all."

Her head drooped on his shoulder, and she said, "I'm tired. . . ."

"Go on," Russell said.

"Well——!" she reflected. "Well, then we met at Castelnau. When you took me back to the annexe—I lay next to Roger—I lay awake for hours, thinking about you and imagining you, and that was my first infidelity."

"Had there never been anyone else?"

"No. No one. I told you."

"Why not?"

“Why not?”

She frowned a little as she repeated his question, thinking of her answer.

“I suppose it was because I never wanted to. . . . Roger, in his way, has been very good to me. I don’t want to give a wrong impression.”

“I see,” said Russell coldly, removing her hands from his neck.

“No,” said Laura, “I don’t think you see. But I want you to. I don’t want you to imagine that I loved you—and love you—as a refuge from an unhappy marriage. Can’t you understand, my darling? If that were so, anybody else would have done. Don’t you see?”

His face had become sulky, and she raised it so that she could look at him.

“You were happy,” he said and the words had a cadence of reproach.

She thought for a moment, and said, “Happy?—I don’t know. I imagine I was in a limited and restless way. We had phases of pleasure and fun. Roger was always engaged in doing something. But I knew—I knew all the time that it wasn’t what I’d longed for. When I was a girl, I knew so clearly that I wanted. . . .”

“Where were you at school? You know, you’ve never confessed.”

“I was at Cheltenham.”

“And do you think Miss Beale would approve of your present posture?” he asked sternly.

She looked at herself, and said, “Frankly, no. Shall I do some buttons up?”

“No, unbutton the bottom one.”

He put his hand on her shoulder inside her dress, and said, “Go on.”

"There's not much to tell," she said. "I realised quite soon that this wasn't the absolute happiness that I'd always looked for. It was a compromise—a mediocre compromise between dream and reality. . . . Don't think I'm blaming Roger," she added quickly. "It's so silly to blame people because they're out of tune with each other. You might as well say two notes of music are guilty for not being in harmony."

"What went wrong?" Russell asked.

"That's just it. Nothing went wrong. We were basically wrong for each other. What I thought was energy in Roger turned out to be a sort of frustrated violence. And what I thought was a heroic individualism became in private"—she laughed—"plain obstinacy."

They didn't speak for a few moments, till she said, "Did you see the *Standard* yesterday?"

"Yes," said Russell. "I'm afraid it didn't do him any good."

"But why didn't the wretched policeman let him park the car . . . ?"

"Listen, Laura," said Russell, "the purpose of law is to safeguard the general interest."

"That sounds pompous."

"But it's true. What makes your husband think he's so endowed with 'superior wisdom and judgement' that he can break the regulations and expect an apology from the police? It's really—presumptuous."

"But they were malicious, dragging in his air-certificate."

"I'm sorry, darling. It was he who dragged it in."

"Don't let's quarrel, Stephen," she said humbly. "I have the habit of defending him. I've done it for a very long time."

"Do you love him, Laura? Tell me. It's very serious and important for me to know."

"Love . . ." she repeated, "you said yourself it's a much-abused word. I wish we could invent another word for love."

"I want to know if you love him."

"If you live long enough with a cat or a dog," said Laura, "you grow to love them through habit and familiarity. And if you live long enough with a person who every now and again shows you kindness—you love them too."

"In that case, I understand," said Russell. "I think we'd better get dressed."

Her eyes flooded with tears, and she said, "No, Stephen, you don't understand. There's no one—no one in the whole world—whom I wouldn't change for you. And I'd do it now—this moment—if you asked me to."

"What about Peter?"

"Peter . . ." she said slowly. "Peter and Jenny—they're a problem."

"They're one of several problems. . . . Perhaps," said Russell, kissing her hands, "Perhaps, Laura darling, we ought to try and be cautious—just for a bit. It might be as well to see what happens at Hoyland."

"You'd like that very much, wouldn't you?" she said, looking straight into his eyes.

"Yes," he said decisively. "Yes, I would. I'd like to get into Parliament. It would be like crossing a frontier. Is that bad?"

"No," she replied. "If it would make you happy, I want it for you. But not if it takes you away from me. I've told you that already."

"You mustn't be afraid. . . ."

"I'm not afraid of anything in the whole world. Not if I can feel secure and believe that you love me. . . . But last Thursday . . ." her face became anxious as she remembered, "last Thursday I was frightened."

"On Thursday?" Russell said quickly. "On Thursday we were terribly happy. . . ."

"Yes, before that," said Laura. "I was frightened in case I didn't please you."

Russell began, "You pleased, and please me. . . ."

The door-bell rang twice, a loud, shattering peal that made Laura and Russell spring apart in shock. For a moment, they stared at each other until Russell put one finger to Laura's mouth. She had begun to tremble, and he could see the acceleration of the pulse in her neck in time to his own heart-beat. With his free hand, he switched off the light, and they lay together in the room's twilight without speaking. The bell reverberated again, and Russell said in Laura's ear, "No one can come in. They'll go away."

Outside on the landing, they could hear a shuffling. Then the letter-box clicked and footsteps descended the stairs.

Gradually, her trembling stopped, and she looked up at him and said, "I'm not cowardly, Stephen. Only inexperienced."

And he waited to answer, "I'm not inexperienced, Laura; only cowardly," but the glib jest faded as it formed, and he said, "Don't be afraid. I'll take care of you."

"Please take me away, Stephen," she said. "At some time—please, Stephen. If we love each other—I know it's not possible now—with Hoyland and the Recorder-ship—but if I can hope!"

She switched on the light again, and stood by the side of the bed, smoothing her dress.

"It's strange how greedy one becomes," she went on. "First of all, I didn't know you at all. . . . And then I saw you once and thought I'd be happy if I could see you every now and again. And then I wanted to see you every day." She began to make up her face at the dressing-table. "And now, since Thursday—I never want to leave you—never, never, never!"

She looked radiant and composed when she turned back to him.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"I'm thinking," he said, "that you look very beautiful—and that you'll be late for dinner."

Her smile slowly disappeared, and she took up her handbag and the yellow rose that he had given her when she arrived.

Metcalfe stood in front of the indicator with its long tables of place-names, watching the slides move into position as they announced the train arrivals. Like a great cave, the station boomed and squawked and murmured with oceanic sounds—the outpouring of passengers in waves, the upward flood from underground, eddies and rivulets of men and women emerging and disappearing like water in sand; and above it all, the cry of the woman announcer, plangent, arresting and incomprehensible.

The Portsmouth train was nineteen minutes late.

"You waiting for Portsmouth?" said the bald man in khaki shorts who was standing next to Metcalfe.

"Yes," said Metcalfe.

"It's late," said the man in shorts.

"Well, what d'you expect?" said Metcalfe, moving away. He regarded "shorts" except for their formal occasions as being anarchic.

"They say there's been some trouble on the line," an elderly woman said knowingly.

Metcalfe looked at the faces gaping upwards to the indicator, and pushed through the crowd in the direction of the station-master's office. An electric baggage-trolley clanged a path ahead of him, and Metcalfe half-ran behind it.

"Any news of the Portsmouth train?" he said urgently to a superintendent whom he stopped on the way.

"Portsmouth? Portsmouth?" The superintendent reflected. "I think," he said, "there's been a delay sir. Better ask at the office."

Metcalfe felt his hands become damp, and he began to run past the brilliantly lit bookstall towards the office.

"Hello, dad, what's the hurry?" he heard a voice call.

"Good Lord!" said Metcalfe, pulling himself up with embarrassment and relief. He slapped both hands on his son's shoulders.

"I thought you were coming from Portsmouth."

"I was," said Peter grinning. "The cooling system broke down but I managed to scrounge a lift. Thought I'd meet you here. Where's mother?"

"She had a headache. Come on, Peter, let's give you a hand."

"No, you don't," said Peter, lifting his heavy canvas bag. "I'll convince you. . . ."

His father struggled amiably with him for possession.

"Let go, dad," said Peter. "You're making me conspicuous."

"You let go," said his father, and together, tugging affectionately and uncomfortably at the bag that trundled between them, they made for the car outside the station.

"And how's the old Lag?" asked Peter, settling himself next to Metcalfe.

"You speak more respectfully of your father," came the reply as the Lagonda swept in a wide arc past a block of traffic on the Embankment. "Tell me about yourself. No more of that rheumatism stuff?"

Peter laughed. "It's seven years since I had rheumatic fever, and since then I've won the school hundred yards twice. You're like an old woman, dad—if you don't mind me saying so." He patted his father on the back to mitigate his boldness, and Metcalfe laughed.

"Don't get me wrong," he said banteringly. "I'm not worried about you, my boy. I'm worried about myself. . . . I'm relying on you one day to support me in the way I've accustomed myself to."

"Well, you'd better teach me a few things. When am I starting my driving lessons?"

"Tomorrow, sir."

"That's all right. . . . And what about flying?"

"No. Not just yet."

"But you will take me up."

"Not without your mother's permission."

"You'll have to help me."

"You'll find her tough."

"O.K. But if she agrees?"

"Next week."

"Very well," said Peter, satisfied. "Carry on, Metcalfe!"

Metcalfe slowed the car down as they drove through Hyde Park. He wanted to prolong the minutes of relaxation that he felt with his son. They drove without speaking, at ease and free from tension.

"When are you going back?" he asked at last.

"Friday a fortnight."

"Friday? I thought term didn't begin till the Tuesday after."

"Well . . ." Peter began, and became silent, unsmiling.

"What d'you mean 'well'?" Metcalfe asked.

"Oh, nothing. . . ."

"But you must mean something," said Metcalfe, accelerating. "Don't you like being home?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, why . . . I don't get it. You stayed sailing a week longer than you intended. Now you want to go back four days earlier than you need. What about your housemaster?"

"It's all right with him. I've got to get settled in," said Peter. His face had become sullen, and he switched on the wireless. Metcalfe stretched out his hand, and switched it off.

"That's not the real reason, Peter," he said quietly. "Come on, old chap. Tell me. Aren't you happy at home?"

He drew the car into the side of the road, and stopped the engine.

Peter smoothed his hair from his face, and said, looking at the illuminated dashboard, "It isn't that, dad."

"Well, what is it?"

"It's . . ." Peter hesitated.

"Go on."

"It's just that—honestly, dad, I just can't stand those awful rows you have with mother. I just can't stand them. One minute everything's fine. Then—we're going to the cinema or something—and I hear you screaming. . . ."

"Screaming?"

"Well, bawling—shouting—call it what you like. . . . I don't know what it's all about, and I don't want to know. But you asked me, dad. . . ."

His face was flushed, and his nose had reddened.

"That's all right, Peter," said Metcalfe, starting his engine again. "I know exactly what you mean. But you needn't misunderstand. It happens in most families. . . . I'm very sorry. I've had a lot of things to cope with lately. I don't want to bother you with them."

"Can't I help you, dad?" Peter said anxiously. "If I were to leave school——!"

"You can't get out of it that way," said Metcalfe, resuming his light tone. "You're going to Trinity, my boy, and you're going to get a First Class degree in engineering."

"Second Class," said Peter.

"All right, I'll settle for a Second Class."

"In that case, may I stay home till the Tuesday?" Peter asked.

They had arrived at Portland Place, and they walked across the pavement to the swing doors, arm in arm, with Metcalfe carrying the canvas bag.

'You're looking rather thin,' said Laura.

'It's an optical illusion,' Peter replied, pausing with

the chicken-bone in his hand. "I weigh nine stone. But you're looking different."

"Like a beer?" Metcalfe asked.

"Lager, thanks," said Peter.

"You mustn't encourage him," said Laura. "He ought to be drinking lemonade."

"I think it's the way you've done your hair," said Peter.

Laura shrugged her shoulders, and tried to remove herself from his persistent gaze by walking to a window and opening it.

"Honestly, you look different," he went on in between mouthfuls of chicken. "Something about the eyes."

"I've had a beastly headache all day," she said.

"Oh, is that it?" Peter said casually. "I thought there was something."

Metcalfe lay sprawled in an armchair, smoking a cigar with long, satisfied puffs.

"You know, he's right, Laura," he said. "You're looking—what's the word——"

"Dessicated," she suggested.

"No, dehydrated."

"Thanks," she said, laughing. "I have an exceptionally polite family."

Metcalfe heaved himself to his feet, put his arm around her shoulders, and kissed her cheek.

"Our manners are rude, but we mean no harm'," he said.

She disengaged herself, and said to Peter, "Your father's very gay tonight."

"I am," said Metcalfe. "I've heard from Wakey-Wakey."

"From Wakelin?" Laura asked.

"Yes."

Metcalf drew a pattern of smoke with a twist of his cigar.

"He says everything's going to be O.K."

"But how—how does he know?" Laura asked cautiously.

"Of course, he knows," said Metcalf, a vein suddenly starting in his forehead. "He told me a quarter of an hour ago that Bewsher sent the papers for an independent opinion to a top lawyer—and he'd advised restoring my licence. Isn't that good enough?"

"I think . . . it's wonderful," said Laura, her face relaxed in satisfaction. "It's wonderful. Oh, darling, I'm so glad."

The endearment which she had not used for many days escaped her lips, and with a mild sense of guilt, she said, "Oh, Roger, I'm so glad."

But Metcalf had been touched by her spontaneous tenderness, and he stroked her hand as she resumed her seat next to Peter.

"I'm very glad, Laura dear," he said. "Very glad. I hope we'll all be happier—from now on."

"Jolly good, dad," said Peter, sharing in the general delight. "What about a drink? . . . Champagne, Ho!"

"You stick to your beer," said Metcalf. "Like a brandy, Laura?"

"No, Roger," she said. "You have one. I'll watch you."

He poured himself a large brandy, and said, "We've been plotting."

"That's right," said Peter, putting the tray aside and taking his mother's hand.

"It sounds ominous," said Laura. "When did you do all this?"

"When you were getting the chicken," said Metcalfe. "Tell me, Laura—would you mind if we went away—for a week or two?"

"No," she said hesitantly. "I think I'd rather like it. . . . Yes, it would be a very good idea."

She looked at Metcalfe, standing with his legs apart by the fireplace, his left hand in his pocket, his right hand casually holding his cigar. And the familiar face with the two harsh lines in his cheeks that softened when he smiled and changed its whole aspect from one of defiance into tenderness, looked for her in that moment their years of communion and intimacy. He smiled to her a friendly, encouraging smile, and she smiled back to him.

"Yes," Laura repeated, taking up the tray. "Where are we going?"

"I'm sorry, darling," said Metcalfe. "I didn't make myself clear. I meant Peter and I—Clitheroe's been asking me if we'd like to do some rough shooting next week."

"And what about me?" Laura asked.

"Why not go off to Torquay or somewhere? . . ."

"Torquay? I hate it. The whole place is potted with palms."

"Well, Bournemouth—anywhere—Castelnau."

"No," she said fiercely. "No, Roger. I don't want to." She laid the tray aside, and put her arms around him. "Please, Roger, let me come with you and Peter. It's important—terribly important."

"Oh, come on," said Metcalfe. "Don't get so worked up, old girl."

"I'm not worked up," Laura said in a louder, more emphatic voice. "I want to go with you."

"Why?"

"Because I do—because it's our last chance."

"What d'you mean—our last chance? What on earth do you mean? Really, Laura, you're getting rather hysterical."

Metcalfc pressed his cigar slowly into an ash-tray till the leaves crackled and splayed like a fungus.

"I'm not hysterical—not the least bit. . . . I . . ."

"I think this is where I go to bed," said Peter hurriedly rising. "Good-night, dad . . . 'Night, mother."

They were silent till he had gone from the room. Then Laura said, controlling her voice, "Roger, I'm asking you most solemnly to take me with you."

"No," said Metcalfc. "I'm not going to be bullied and blackmail-d. Five minutes ago . . . What on earth's the matter with you?"

His level voice had become shrill, and his eyes had darkened.

Laura picked up a fashion magazine, staring at a caption "What to Wear with What," till the phrase became a persistent distraction in her mind from the simple answer she was trying to formulate to the vast, unanswerable question that her husband had posed. What on earth's the matter with you? With us? What to wear with what. The problem of the suitable and the unsuitable. The nature of harmony. How are you? I'm fine. But who are you? The associations of the problem were infinite and inconsequential like the drift before sleep, and he was insisting to her tired mind, "What is the matter, Laura?"

"Nothing . . . nothing, nothing—nothing!"

And she ran from the room, weeping. A few seconds later, in the bedroom, she heard the slam of the front door.

When Metcalfe had gone, she dialled Russell's number, and wiping her wet cheeks with the back of her left hand, listened anxiously to the burr-burr at the other end. At last, there was a click, and a voice said, "Hello."

"Stephen? . . . I'm so glad you're back." She 'poke in an urgent whisper.

"Where are you speaking from?" he asked. She told him, and he said doubtfully, "Perhaps you'd better ring tomorrow."

"No. It's all right. . . . Oh, darling, he wants me to go away."

"Where?"

"I don't know—anywhere. He said Torquay. . . ."

"Good Lord!"

"Or Bournemouth or Castelnau."

There was a pause.

"Are you there, Stephen?"

"Yes."

"Isn't it awful?"

"No. . . . By a pleasing coincidence, I'm going to Marseilles myself next Tuesday."

She sat down on the armchair by the telephone, and her frown slowly gave way to a delivered smile.

"You . . . really . . . are? Is it really a coincidence?"

"Yes. It's a coincidence I hope to arrange tomorrow."

She could hear him breathing at the other end of the

line, and said, "Darling . . . darling, darling . . . don't go away . . . not for a moment."

"I'm still here."

"Stephen," she said after a few seconds. "Am I a dreadful woman?"

"Yes," he said.

"Will you telephone me tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"And do you?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Very much."

"I must ring off," she whispered. "Good-night, my darling. . . ."

With a rapid glance towards the door, she replaced the receiver.

A second later, Peter already in his pyjamas, entered the room.

"Sorry, mother," he said, "I wanted my book."

"Here it is, dear," she said calmly, and handed it to him. Her arm was quivering.

Chapter Eight

LEANING on Russell's arm, Madame Nodier moved slowly and heavily over the gravel of the terrace, her straw hat flapping, her yellow silks floating. Near the stone balustrade, she paused for a moment to kick aside a metal ball abandoned by some children the previous day. But otherwise, she was serene. Twelve o'clock was the time, when, having risen and reimposed her enamelled make-up, she felt well in health and calm in spirit; the arthritic pains and the worries about her staff were for later. She raised her chin in the air as if to tauten the dewlaps. Her stick, shaped like a shepherdess's crook, had a special elegance to match her new guests—the Princesse de Léoville-Goudron who had arrived the evening before, M. Vèzy, the silk manufacturer, and his friend, Mlle. Gospozha of the Comédie Française.

"No, my dear Russell," she said—she always called him by his surname without prefix when they were alone—"you mustn't worry about Gisèle . . . although you were *wicked* with her."

"Well——" he began.

"No excuses," she said, wheezing a little as they began the gentle incline leading to the embrasure overlooking

the sea. "You were wicked—like all men. And she, poor darling, like all women had to console herself."

"When did she get engaged? I'm delighted," said Russell.

"Half-delighted," said Madame Nodier, with a sharp glance sideways at him. "The other half says, 'How dare she console herself so quickly? How dare she find another man before I'm sure I've finished with her?' Isn't that right?"

She wagged her stick in the air, and the maculae on her hand stood out, yellow-brown against the white skin.

"You know all that's worst in human nature, Madame Nodier," said Russell. "I'm not sure it's a good thing to lift too many stones."

"Don't worry," she replied. "One's illusions about oneself are very hard to lose. I'm never quite sure if it's more painful to lose one's illusions about oneself or about others."

"I've never had any trouble losing my illusions about others," said Russell, and his smile faded.

"That loss is the most painful of all," said Madame Nodier, "the hardest to endure!"

They walked on in silence, remembering his first visit to Castelnau after the war.

"You were very kind to me, Madame Nodier."

"No, I am a realist. I like to look reality straight in the face, steadfastly." She stopped, and looked hard at him. "I don't want to find a snivelling escape in sentimentality," she said. "Let's know how good life is—and how rotten."

"And Gisèle . . ."

"She's very young. M. Rebec is a champagne-producer—better still, the son of a champagne-producer. He's

very attractive," she added with a touch of malice, "one of the two hundred families."

"Yes," said Russell, provoked into self-defence, "*Bacchus tout entier à sa proie attaché.*"

"No," said Madame Nodier, bowing graciously to Mlle. Gospozha who interrupted her abuse of M. Vezy to greet her. "No, he doesn't drink. Not Bacchus—Apollo!"

She squeezed his hand as if to indicate that she had goaded him enough, and said, "You mustn't be jealous——"

"I'm not."

"Or possessive. But I will give you the benefit of an old woman's experience. . . ."

"Not old. . . ."

"It's what Rochefoucauld said many years ago—he said, 'Only a second love can banish a first.'"

"You think that's true?"

"Yes, I do. And a third can chase away the second, and a fourth the third. . . . and so on, until one day when you're old, you look back on a calvary of agony and ecstasy—and wonder what it was all about."

"I haven't had that experience. Once, a long time ago . . . and now."

"And the women in between? You're like a drunkard who doesn't count his drinks before dinner."

"I thought we were talking of love," said Russell. They had turned at the end of the terrace, and were walking with the light breeze behind them. It enfolded the terrace in a scent of lime.

"How long are you staying in Marseilles?" asked Madame Nodier. "Why don't you spend a few days with us?"

"I wish I could," said Russell. "But you know how it

is. I've got a job to do for the Chantiers Labrousse, and once that's finished, I'm going straight back. . . . I only managed to get away today because I'd promised Metcalfe I'd look Laura up. . . ."

"You know she's leaving us today."

"Really? I didn't know. . . ."

"Oh, yes. She's going to Cabasson. She finds it quieter there."

The old woman advanced with the impassive expression of one who has heard every lie the world can tell and is no longer vulnerable to surprise.

"In Cabasson," she added almost *sotto-voce*, "the cicadas creak more quietly."

Then, after they had crunched a few more steps over the gravel, she said loudly. "You look happy, my dear Russell."

"Yes," said Russell gravely. "I am very happy."

"In that case," she said, "you must be very careful."

"Careful? Why?"

"You must be careful because happiness is fragile. . . . And you—you're like a juggler with three fragile glasses all in the air at the same time. If you take your eye away for a moment—pouf!"

"I don't quite understand. . . ."

"It doesn't matter. What time are you meeting Mrs. Metcalfe?"

"I was to have met her at twelve."

"Don't worry. She'll come. Now what were we talking about before?"

"About love."

"Yes—about love . . . about love. What were you saying?"

"I will make a confession to you, Madame Nodier, that you may think naïve. . . ."

"Every sincere confession is naïve."

"Well, my confession is that after all these years—after all that you call 'the women in between'—I've come to the conclusion, the simple, romantic, nineteenth-century conclusion that for everyone there is a designated person, one's own counterpart, whom perhaps one may meet and perhaps not. And everything else, anyone else is an approximate, inadequate substitute."

"There's nothing new in that," said Madame Nodier crisply, "and it's much older than the nineteenth-century romantics. It's Platonic. But it belongs to an ideal world. After four husbands, I'm on the side of the cynics. Have you ever read Villon?"

"I've read the ballads," said Russell.

"Excellent!" Madam Nodier said. "I will quote him to you. Listen—" She began to recite in a declamatory voice.

" *Folles amours font les gens bestes:
Salmon en ydolatria:
Samson en perdit ses lunettes.
Bien est eureux qui riens n'y a' . . .* "

Do you understand?"

"I'm afraid not," said Russell. "You'll have to say it more slowly."

"No," said Madame Nodier with a deep bow to the Princesse de Leoville-Goudron who was passing with a retinue of two women companions and her hairdresser. "I will translate it. '*Folles amours*'—the folly of love takes men's reason away. Because of it, Solomon turned to idolatry." She paused, and fumbled for the translation of the next line. "'*Samson en perdit ses lunettes*'—yes, I know—because of it, Samson lost his—his sight. The happy

ones have nothing to do with it." And then she repeated slowly, "The happy ones have nothing to do with it."

"It's a poem I must study," said Russell looking at his watch. "In the meantime I can only tell you . . ."

"Don't tell me now," said Madame Nodier. "I can see Mrs. Metcalfe coming up the steps. But I am very fond of you, my dear Russell. . . . Reflect! . . . Reflect that in perhaps three months' time—or six months—when all the novelties and excitements are over . . ."

"I think I'd rather not pursue the subject," said Russell stiffly.

She looked at him again, and he saw that her small blue eyes, were rheumy, either with the wind or with tears.

"I'm on your side, Russell. You mustn't take it amiss. I've been through it all. I'm on your side. I don't want you to come to harm.

*'David le roy, sage prophetes,
Crainte de Dieu en oubliä,
Voyant laver cuisses bein faites . . .
Bien est eüeux qui riens n'y'a!'* . . .

Good-bye, Russell."

She shook his hand, and raised herself step by step up the stone flight that led to the entrance. When she reached the amphora with the trailing geraniums, she paused, her chest mewling as if it contained a kitten, and said, "I'm on your side. . . . Be very careful!"

The Calanque, slumping low in the water because of the crowd that filled the upper deck and the saloon, was

nearing the Ile d'Or, and had already begun to manoeuvre a broad sweep to south-west, which was to bring it alongside the jetty. Some of the passengers had risen and were collecting their parcels and suitcases; others moved to the rail, waving to their friends on shore. Children shouted with pleasure as the boat slowly carcened, first changing the line of the horizon and then righting itself with a splashing of water and a general lurch of those who were staring at the pink walls of the Eglise de la Sainte-Colombe, the decrepit fishermen's houses and the drying nets on the beach.

The engines stopped for a few seconds, and the boat wallowed. Then, a signal clanged from the bridge, and with engines reversed and a foaming turbulence around it, the Calanque entered port.

Under the awning near the gangway, Russell sat with his arm on Laura's shoulder, looking idly at the scene. The queue of passengers trying to disembark had been met by a struggling phalanx of intending travellers who had already swept aside the gendarme and the ticket inspector. The oncoming passengers who each wore a blue label in their shorts or dress were Germans travelling in a party organised by the Hanseatischer Weltreisegesellschaft; the descending passengers were mostly French although there were also six Dutch women teachers and two German nuns who had sat together in a motionless group all the way from Le Lavandou. In the uproar, a woman fell and screamed. For a few seconds the holiday mood changed into an abusive panic as the travellers crushed from both sides against the congested centre.

"Fluch!" shouted a Frenchman with the Légion d'Honneur in his sports-coat. "Fluch—verfluchter Kerl!" to an obese German who, a portmanteau in each hand,

was using the bevel of his stomach to nudge his wife through the press.

"Fluch——!" he repeated. His sunburnt face was brick-red with fury not merely with the German but with his own inarticulacy that prevented him from adding to the root of "curse".

The woman who had fallen rose with bloody knees medalling her plump brown legs, and a smiling good-humour which shamed the disputants. The gangway suddenly became uncorked, and the Weltreisegesellschaft reformed into its prearranged groups of eight. The ticket collector resumed his polite collection; the gendarme frowned again; and the shouts from the quayside were no longer shouts of rage but of greeting and gaiety.

"That's how I like it to be," said Laura, walking with Russell to the rail. "I'd like everyone in the world to be happy—and I'd like to be here—and happy with you."

She looked around her. "I like to be with you in crowds—and to know no one at all. Do you like that?"

"I like it very much," said Russell solemnly.

"Why do you sound sad?" she asked.

"Because I want to be with you—and it's all so very difficult. The old girl was very suspicious—very ominous about my reputation and my career."

"But you weren't worried, were you?"

"No. Not a bit. I lied to her, and she knew I was lying But she's all right. She'd never. . . ."

"No," Laura interrupted him. "Of course she wouldn't. I told her I was going to Cabasson after you dropped me. . . ."

"You shook hands very formally with me."

"Yes, I liked that too."

The boat had begun to move again, and the late

afternoon sun was now shining directly on to them. A cool breeze ruffled the water, but the sun was hot and steady.

"Do you miss London?" he asked. "Home?"

"No," she replied. "Not one bit."

She turned her face, and kissed his hand that rested on her shoulder. "Wherever I am with you," she said, "I feel I'm home. . . . I think that's why I first loved you. I felt at ease and unafraid. I felt I no longer had to defend myself. . . . You were there, and I no longer had to search."

"Perhaps," said Russell, "it's too late."

"Oh, no," she said, her eyes wide open and startled.

"We've both accumulated too much baggage on the way."

"Oh, no," she repeated. "No. . . . I feel as if it was all in preparation for meeting you."

"But how can you be sure?" he insisted.

"I knew I loved you," she said, "because one day—it was soon after I met you—I was thinking about you when I was waiting for you on the steps of Burlington House, and I felt a strange feeling, one that I'd never known before. . . . I felt humble. And I knew that I loved you."

"But with him . . ."

"With him I'd felt humiliation—deep and utter humiliation—but never humility. I don't want to talk about it. . . . But sometimes"—the lines at the corners of her mouth drooped—"sometimes I feel such a deep and bitter resentment towards him for his casualness and his indifference and his arrogance and his cruel assumption that I would always be there whatever he did to me"

Russell drew his hand away, and then put it back.

"And do you feel remorse?" he asked.

"No," she said. "Let's just shut our eyes and turn our faces to the sun. . . . Close your eyes, my darling."

He held her arm, and she put her forehead against his cheek while the boat chugged its way onward against the cross-currents that swirled around the islands. Occasionally, the sun would disappear behind the volcanic outcrops of the Ile des Pecheurs, and when they passed Les Tourbies and reached the approaches to the open sea, they saw that the sun was beginning to descend the sky.

"The cliffs are of porphyry," said one of the passengers, reading in an emphatic German voice from his book. "They are pink in the evening light."

And there before them, risen quietly from the haze, was La Roseraie, alone on the horizon, tranquil.

Chapter Nine

ON the third day, they were sitting together on the balcony of the Pension Lacome that looked out on the small craggy beach. The short season of La Roseraie was already over; the coloured umbrellas belonging to M. Croisic were piled against the half-dozen bathing huts; and the trestled restaurant was closed. On September 1st the retreat to the mainland of the holiday-makers who filled the pension from July 15th onwards was complete, and no assurance by Madame Lacome that the season lasted till mid-October could ever bring more than a handful of German or Dutch tourists after that date. There were no hotels in La Roseraie: the fisherman and Madame Lacome had tried to form a Syndicat d'Initiative, but that too had failed. The island remained undeveloped, too far for a day-journey, too wild and too poor for the self-indulgent, its only attraction the labyrinth of volcanic stone in the interior and its legend of the Pensive Lady.

"I asked him to make a picnic," said Laura. "Anything interesting? . . . Have a brioche!"

She buttered a brioche for Russell as he drank his coffee and read his letters.

"Nothing," he said, "I told Owen . . ."

"Who's he?"

"Owen—my clerk—I told him I didn't want anything professional to be forwarded. . . . Here's something amusing . . . the Chicago Bar Association . . ."

Laura took the letter from his hand, and read it rapidly.

"You won't go," she said.

He stood up, and walked around the trellis table to where she was sitting, and standing behind her, cupped his hands under her chin while she pressed her head back against his body.

"No," he said, "I won't go. I don't want to leave you—ever again—not even to lecture to the Chicago Bar Association."

The sun was hot, and Laura took off the primrose jacket that she was wearing.

"You're very brown," said Russell, putting his hands on her shoulders.

"So are you," she said, standing and facing him. "Do you know why I love you?"

"No."

"Because,"—she gave him an examining glance at arm's length—"because the top of my head comes up to your nose."

"That's very commonplace," said Russell.

"Because you're brown and——"

"There are ten thousand like that all along the coast."

"Well, it's all that," said Laura, "but on top of it I love you too."

"You mean you love me because you love me."

"That's it."

"It's a very good reason," said Russell thoughtfully.

"The only reason. It's the reason why I love you too. . . ."

It isn't only that you are beautiful and intelligent and sympathetic—I've known other women like that——"

"I wish you hadn't."

"It's because when I spoke to you, I had a moment of recognition—as if I'd waited all those years with an image imprinted in my mind, and then, suddenly, there it was."

They walked slowly, with Laura holding Russell's arm, down the slope to where the driver was waiting with his cab to take them to the Labyrinth. He was an Italian-Frenchman with a nut-brown face and neck and a black moustache, and spoke to his horse in Italian. He helped Laura into her seat, asked Russell if he wanted the canopy up or down, stroked his horse's neck, and with an affectionate invocation, urged it up the path.

The hills were of rock, painfully terraced here and there with vineyards. Occasionally, a house with flaking plaster, its walls plaited with olives hanging out to dry, gave signs of habitation and industry. But otherwise the road to the summit of the island with the great gulf of stone through its centre, was bare and deserted.

"Do you know what this reminds me of?" said Russell contentedly. He was lounging against the back of the carriage with his arm around Laura's waist, and she was lying with her head on his shoulder.

"No," she said. "Tell me."

"It reminds me of New York."

"Oh, darling, how could you?" she said, sitting up. "This is so beautiful."

"So's New York," said Russell. "Really it is—New York at this time of year—it's very much like this. The skyscrapers on each side of you in Fifth Avenue or Madison—it's like being in a canyon with breezes and winds. I loved it."

"You never told me—

"Come back," said Russell, putting his arm around her again and kissing her neck. "I spent six months in New York in 1947. I was a legal adviser to the Glanville Foundation. At least, that's what they hired me to be."

"And what were you?"

"Nothing. I had no work—their litigation in England didn't come till much later. I had a suite of rooms in the Algonquin Hotel, and went to dinner-parties to make up the number."

"I don't like that," said Laura morosely. "I don't like to think of you enjoying yourself without me—even ten years ago."

"Well, I enjoyed myself for three months and for the rest of the time I didn't enjoy myself so much. You see, Americans are the most hospitable of people. They love to entertain Europeans as guests—but not as immigrants. After three months, I had to keep explaining to my friends that I didn't intend to stay."

"What happened then?"

"Oh, then it was fine. They started giving me farewell parties."

Far below, the sea had become a deep green, braided around the edge of the island with foam. Imperceptibly, although the horse was plodding now and the driver had leapt down to help it on, they had climbed the winding ascent till the villas of La Roseraie lay beneath them like a cluster of white dice. The air was clear and dry, without a trace of smoke, soundless except for the stolid, laboured clop of the horse's hooves on the flints and the occasional swish of feathers in the driver's whip.

After they had been travelling for about twenty minutes, the landscape began to change. Instead of the

terraces and peasant houses, there were vast, tumbling rocks, a glacis to the huge fissure in the mountain. A sign, half-obliterated by the *graffiti* of tourists, said "Labyrinthe de la Dame Pensive," and close by, in the Restaurant de la Dame Pensive, a woman in a black dress was arranging bottles with an indifferent air as if it was nearly closing time, though the day had scarcely begun.

"It's so wild and beautiful," said Laura. "And so quiet and peaceful!"

At that moment, a faint chugging that had seemed to come from an aeroplane became louder and more intense, and suddenly, a convoy of motor-tricycles, four of them, followed by a charabanc, came spluttering and bouncing up the path. They carried the members of the Hanseatischer Weltreisegesellschaft who had been staying at the pine-camp, and were due to leave that afternoon.

"Good Lord," said Russell. "They've tracked us down."

They de-bussed like a regiment, taking up stations; commissariat, photographic stores, provisions—everything was arranged. And they were happy. The desolate landscape became peopled and full of voices. Heinz, Friedrich, Liesl, Anne-Marie, Mutti and Vati—they laughed, shouted and made echoes, and finally, lined up for the short climb to the porphyry rock of La Dame Pensive.

"How long would it take to walk back to La Rose-raie?" Russell asked the driver.

He shrugged his shoulders, and said, "Me? It would take ten minutes. You and Madame? Twenty minutes." He stroked the neck of his sweating horse. "The horse? Six minutes. . . . Downhill," he added.

"All right," said Russell, paying him. "We'll walk back."

"You can take the left path," said the driver, "to the Dame Pensive. Then there is no path. But you can see the big rock, and that will bring you back to the Restaurant."

He handed Russell the picnic basket, waved to them cheerfully, and within seconds they saw that the carriage had already rounded the first bend below them on its way down to the shore.

"Let's go up to that rock," said Laura, pointing to a boulder that seemed to overhang the cliff, "and stay there and have lunch later on. And then all those people will go away."

"All right," said Russell. The German tourists greeted them courteously and Laura smiled back to them.

"Extraordinary people," said Laura. "They ache to be loved. Have you ever been to Germany?"

"Yes," said Russell. "I was in Berlin in 1945—when we first arrived there. I was on the Sicherheitsdienst investigation."

"How extraordinary!" said Laura. "I know you so well—but there are great gaps in your life that I know nothing about—years and years of them."

"When I think back on them," said Russell, "they seem as if they were all one. Very dull—and preparatory. Like learning scales."

They walked on with their arms around each other, and Russell said at last, as if he'd been reflecting, "I was at Nuremberg in 1946."

"You mean, you're not pro-German?"

"Not pro-German—nor anti-German. I'm not anti-anyone in the world. I'm pro-you—and you're the only thing I care about."

Russell took off his shirt, and spread out his jacket on the bone-white stone; and they sat there with the sun,

cooled slightly by the atmosphere, breathing on their bodies.

"Stephen," Laura said, as he lay back on the flat stone with his arms behind his head.

"Yes?"

"Can't we—can't we do something about this?"

He sat up, and said, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, darling——" she spoke falteringly, "I can't bear to think we've got to go on lying and cheating. . . . We love each other—but don't you see—if we go on like this, it may somehow affect the quality of our love—it's bound to."

"I see," said Russell. "You want to stop."

"Oh, no," she said, her eyes alarmed. "No. Of course not. But—as we love each other, couldn't we make a new start—both of us? . . . Is that too much?"

"No," said Russell, taking her hands in his. "It isn't too much. It's everything I want. But we must be clear what it means. It means giving up the Recordership—and Hoyland. All of that. And then—what would there be left—in a practical sense?"

"You know I don't want anything for myself," said Laura quickly. "I don't want to cause you troubles and difficulties. That's the only reason I hesitate. I'd go with you tomorrow—anywhere."

"Would you?" Russell was smiling a private smile.

"Of course I would," she said desperately. "Don't doubt me, Stephen. I'm not afraid. I've had difficulties in my life too. I'd go anywhere with you—anywhere."

"And if we were short of money?"

"We wouldn't be. . . ."

Russell laughed aloud. "My dear darling," he said,

"You cope with difficulties by taking as your premise that they don't exist."

"Stop giving me those lawyer's arguments," she said, leaning over him and kissing his mouth; and then her face became sombre again.

"We can't go on like this," she said. "When we get back to London and your Term starts again——"

"We'll see each other."

"Do you promise?"

"I swear—every single day."

"But that isn't enough."

"Be patient, my darling. Let's see how things work out. Perhaps in six month's time——"

"But do you love me?" she asked insistently.

"Yes."

"And you'll never stop?"

"Never."

"In that case," she said, smiling and content, "I'm prepared to feed you."

With her deft fingers, she unpacked the basket, spreading the red linen table-cloth, and laying out the bottle of Cassis, the chicken, the salad and the crisp bread. When she had finished, he knelt at her side and kissed her and she said, "I get so frightened, Stephen—please don't leave me—ever!"

After they had eaten, she said, "I've never really understood," and he bent and kissed her long fingers that were playing over his. "I've never really understood what happened between you and your wife."

He took his hand away, and his face flushed.

"I'm sorry, darling," she said quickly, "I only felt that if once you could tell me, then it would be well—for you as well as me."

He put his arm around her neck, and began to caress her hair.

"I will tell you," he said, "Yes, I will."

"You hate talking about it."

"I never have spoken about it and never will again. But I'll tell you today because today I feel calm and contented."

"Go on, please."

He hesitated, then drew her head on to his chest.

"It's a very short story," he said. "I loved my wife. We'd been married for six years, and somehow or other, I got more and more involved in her."

Laura's breathing seemed to pause.

"I suppose it's living together," she said after a moment. "You can't help loving the person who gives you security."

"I felt safe in her," said Russell. "I believed in her as I believed in God."

"And then?"

"Smith came to live with us. He'd been bombed out. I'd known him for years."

"What sort of person was he?"

Russell laughed, and Laura said, "Don't laugh. When you laugh like that it isn't a laugh at all. I really want to know. What sort of person was he?"

"A thief," said Russell. "He stole at school and I covered up for him. He was constantly engaged in petty thefts—rather mean thefts—from his mother and that sort of thing."

"Why did you put up with him?"

"Well——" Russell reflected, "I knew his family. His father was a friend of my father. He'd always been very good to me. . . . I'd known him so long. At any rate—all the rest you know."

"But how could you have trusted him?"

"I trusted her. I trusted her decency—and, Heaven help me, her taste."

"Poor Stephen," said Laura, raising herself. "Poor darling! It must have been frightful."

"For a long time," said Russell, "Yes. It went in great cycles of hatred, contempt, humiliation, compassion—terrible feelings that came surging up long after I'd buried them. I'd lie awake night after night trying to recreate our past together, remembering things that might have been significant. And thinking all the time that the years that had gone before—the years of happiness—had been wasted—bogus."

He put his forehead on her bare shoulder, and she said, "Don't upset yourself, Stephen. It's not worth it."

"No!" he said, straightening himself, "It's not worth it. It's history."

They were silent for a few moments till she said, "What about him? What do you feel about him?"

"Oh, nothing. He was just nothing. I felt nothing about him—nothing."

They rose, and walked towards the edge of the path over-looking the sea.

"You have told me everything about yourself," Russell said, putting his hands on her shoulders.

"Everything," she said.

"You have told me everything about yourself," he repeated. "About the past as well?"

"Everything."

"I wouldn't like to be disillusioned again!"

"I will never fail you, my darling" Laura said. Her eyes were steady and luminous with love, and he held her

with her face on his, listening to the stillness of the deserted summit and the far off hiss of the sea.

"It's strange," said Russell, the theme now fastened on to him like claws, "how men and women will be truthful—truthful about everything. But when it comes to that—"

"What about us?" said Laura.

"Yes," he replied. "Let's not talk about it." Then he went on "Perhaps it's a defect of imagination—"

"Look at the sea by the two rocks," she interrupted him, pointing to the west of the island. "It's almost orange in the sunlight."

"You want to change the subject."

"Yes—I want to think of today and tomorrow and all the days to come."

"Tear up our history."

"That's right."

"And burn the pieces."

"Yes."

"I will," he said and smiled a relaxed smile, "from this moment onwards."

The voices of the Germans came remotely to Russell's mind from the other side of the labyrinth, and faded, and recurred and mingled with his drowsing thoughts while he dozed, hand in hand, with Laura, half sheltered by a group of ragged firs whose seed had been blown years ago into the sand of the rocks and had taken root and strength in the island's winter. He slept. And when he awoke, half an hour later, there was silence all around

them. The tricycles and the charabanc and the trippers had all disappeared and even the door of the restaurant was closed. Laura was sitting at his side, clasping her knees, and looking down at him.

"There's nothing for it," she said. "We've got to go sightseeing."

Russell stretched himself, and said, "Now that we're private, I'm ready. What shall we do first—La Dame Pensive or the Labyrinth?"

"Oh, the Lady, of course," said Laura. "I've been reading about her in the brochure. It's sweet. Do listen."

He put his head on her lap, and she read to him.

"The legend of the Pensive Lady dates from the 14th century when the Duke of Avignon, having discovered that his wife, Jeanette was conducting an illicit relationship with the Sieur de Baudry, banished her to La Roseraie. Each day at sunset, she would climb to the highest point of the island, dreaming of her lover. When at last she died of grief, she is reputed to have turned into the stone known as La Dame Pensive."

Laura paused, and said. "But they're not taking any chances—do listen. 'The stone is, of course, a natural formation.' That's in case you're superstitious."

They clambered between the huge boulders till they reached one that soared above them all. In its profile against the copper sky, it had the shape of a woman in a wimple with her face sunk on her breast. The sunlight caught pink tints in the rock so that the face was clearly defined in its brooding, melancholy contours. On the shadowed side, the rocks fell smoothly away like a great mantle. The rock had the terrible stillness of death; and after a few moments, Laura said, "There's something quite eerie about it—it's sinister."

"It's a very impressive chunk of rock," said Russell. "When Madame Lacome's Syndicat d'Initiative really gets going, this place will be as crowded as Cheddar Gorge."

"What an awful thought!" said Laura, more cheerfully. "I don't want anyone to come here at all. Let's climb on her head."

He helped her up the steep rock from which they could see the whole of the island below.

"I want to tell you something very important," he said, "On the very highest point in La Roseiraie."

"What is it?" she asked.

He caressed her face with his hand, and said, "On reflection, I think I'll tell you when we get down—at the Pension."

"How soon can we get down?" she asked.

"I think," said Russell, "I know a short cut. We came all the way around, but if we cut through the labyrinth—look, it brings us straight to the restaurant—you can see it from here—and then I'll race you home."

"If you carry me," said Laura.

They climbed down the other face of the rock, and immediately found themselves in the dark green shadows of the labyrinth away from the sun. Apart from the stunted pines, a profusion of ferns grew in the thin, sandy soil.

"It's so different from down below," said Laura, pointing as she hurried in front of Russell to a fir-tree which had been twisted by the changes of wind into the shape of a double-coiled snake. "We might be in a different country."

She walked lightly and gracefully, leaping over spurs of rock, climbing some of the bigger boulders that

strewed their path, and humming to herself as she set the pace.

"What are you singing?" he asked.

"Nothing," she answered gaily. "Just singing. I'm happy."

"How far do you think it is to the road?" Russell called out. "You'll overshoot if you're not careful—at this rate."

"I don't know," she called over her shoulder. "You're navigating. It should be beyond that big rock. Isn't that the one we sat on by the restaurant?"

"Yes," he answered.

But when they reached the rock, ten minutes later, it proved to be only similar in form, the first of an avenue of rocks leading towards a natural, quarry-like dip in the hill-side. They stopped, and Russell said, "Sorry, darling. I'm not much of a guide."

"That's all right," she said indulgently. "Once you've seen one rock, you've seen them all. They're like big business-men."

"Yes," said Russell. "Now you wait here—don't move—and I'll climb the one over there, and I'll make a survey. But don't move."

He quickly climbed the tallest rock, and looked over the boulder-strewn scene for the landmark of the restaurant.

"Can you see anything?" Laura called out.

"Yes," said Russell. "An awful lot of stones."

"Well, come down and let's start again. I'm sure I know the way. It's to the left. Don't you remember? The driver said so."

"That's it," said Russell, remembering. He leapt down, and kissed her on the cheek. "How clever you are!" he said. "I'll walk in front of you, and pioneer."

They began again to make their way over the rocks, now a little more slowly, laboriously in places where the interstices of sand which they followed gave way to vast tumults of stone.

"You all right?" Russell, panting a little, called out to Laura as he helped her up an escarpment.

"Yes, fine," she answered.

For the next quarter of an hour, they walked and climbed with only brief interruptions in their concentrated silence.

At last, Laura stopped and said, "Look, darling."

"What?" asked Russell.

"There," said Laura. "The fir-tree."

With its distinctive, twisted coils, the tree which they had passed nearly three-quarters of an hour before, stood in front of them like a practical joke.

"It can't be!" said Russell in astonishment. "We've been going away from it."

"And there's my belt," said Laura, stooping to pick up the belt of her dress which she had lost earlier in the afternoon.

The sun had fallen behind the mountain, and the air was perceptibly cooler.

"What do we do now?" asked Laura.

Russell said. "We'll work it out. Let's see where the Dame Pensive is. It's up there!" he pointed to the ridge.

"I don't think so," said Laura. "I thought it was over there," pointing to the glow of the sun behind the tree.

"Do you think," she said, "it would be any use shouting?"

"Oh, nonsense," said Russell shortly. He wiped his forehead and drew his soaking shirt away from his skin, and said, "I'm sure it's over there behind the ridge. When we get to the rock, we can go down the way we came."

"All right, sweetie," she said, reassured. "I'll hold on to your arm."

"Are you warm enough?" he asked her.

"Yes—I'll hold on to you, and I'll be warm."

They set off again, clambering towards the ridge through a tangle of prickly scrub. But when they reached the rocks which they had marked in their thoughts as the horizon stones, they saw that a new horizon had already formed ahead of them.

"Feeling all right, darling?" Russell asked. And then he saw that her legs were bleeding from the brambles. He sat her down on a boulder, and tied his handkerchief around the scratches on her right leg. She smiled to him.

"That's much better," she said. "I think we ought to press on. It gets dark rather suddenly. . . Have you any of the Perrier left?"

Russell opened the picnic basket, and said, "No. The Perrier's gone. But I've still got some of the Cassis."

"That'll make me sleepy. Come on, Stephen. Let's get to the top of the ridge. . . . How quiet everything is!"

They trudged through a fissure for about twenty minutes, and then up through what seemed like a natural quarry of reddish stone.

"Not far now," said Russell. "Are you terribly tired?"

"I'm a bit tired," said Laura. "Do you think we're anywhere near?"

"Oh, yes—we can't be more than five minutes away. Like some help?"

"I think I'm better with two hands," said Laura. "It's easier to hoist myself up."

She too was sweating now, and her sunburnt shoulders were glistening.

"Let's keep moving," she said. "It gets so chilly when we stop . . . if only we could get a glimpse of the sea! It makes one feel so terribly shut in."

At the top of the quarry was an avenue of monoliths, and Russell paused.

"This is vaguely familiar," he said.

"Yes, it is," said Laura. "That's the rock you climbed about half an hour ago. Oh, God!"

She sat down, and rested her head on her folded hands. "I'm so tired," she said. Her teeth had begun to chatter.

"Now then, Laura dearest," said Russell soothingly, "don't worry. We can't be far from the road."

"You said that an hour ago," she commented without looking up.

He took off his light grey jacket and put it around her shoulders. She sat there without moving, huddled up, absorbed in her own weariness.

"I'll do another recce," said Russell. "Don't move from here. Whatever you do, don't move till I return."

Once again, he climbed the tall rock that dominated the alley, and stood at the peak, studying the folds and creases of the labyrinth with its concentric stones like the leaves of an artichoke.

"It's simple once you're up here," he called out. She continued to sit exhaustedly without looking up.

"I'm going to explore on the other side," he said.

When she raised her head, he had disappeared. Instead, the shadow of one of the monoliths had extended itself like a dark finger, hugely projected.

"Stephen!" she said in a voice only a little louder than her normal conversational voice.

She stood up, and shouted, "Stephen! . . . Stephen!"

Stephen!" And an antiphon of echoes, diminishing, said, "Stephen! . . . Stephen! . . . Stephen!"

She began to run towards the rock, driven on by a sudden panic that he was gone and that she was lost forever in this labyrinth of stone and that she would never see him again.

"Stephen!" she screamed. "Stephen!"

She could hear her own breath moaning in her throat as she ran.

"Stephen! Stephen! Where are you?"

And from nearby she heard his voice shouting her name. "Laura! Laura! Stay where you are, my darling. . . . I'm coming."

She rushed towards him when he appeared smiling from behind a rock, and said, "Oh Stephen, I thought—I thought you were lost."

"Lost? What an idea! I've found the way down. We're exactly four minutes from the restaurant. I know exactly where it is."

She looked at him severely. "Are you quite sure?" she asked.

"Oh, yes—certain, certain, certain."

"I do love you," she said. "I thought I was going to be here for ever. . . . Don't let's stay here . . . It's frightening."

On the way to La Roseraie, they passed two of the German tourists who were remaining a further day.

"Did you make a good excursion?" asked an amiable fresh-faced woman with grey hair.

"Oh, yes," said Laura, "we had a lovely day. We went to see the Labyrinth."

"I trust you slew the Minotaur," said the woman's husband to Russell.

"Herr Loeser," she explained to Laura, "is joking."

"I missed the Minotaur," said Russell politely, "but,"—with a wave to Laura—"Ariadne helped me to get out."

Herr Loeser looked puzzled for a moment and then burst into appreciative laughter.

"Of course," he said, "your Ariadne. You are Theseus and Madame is Ariadne. . . . Very good, very good. She had the secret!"

"Yes," said Russell, shaking hands with them both. "She had the thread."

"I am very fond of Herr and Frau Loeser," said Russell as he and Laura continued their walk to the Pension. "He is a teacher of Classics in Hamburg, and she teaches domestic science."

"How do you know?"

"He told me yesterday, when you were bathing."

"Darling . . ."

"Yes?"

"I hope you didn't think me stupid and silly."

"No," Russell took her hand. "The unfamiliar can be terrifying and seem monstrous if one loses one's nerve," he said.

"You're very kind and tolerant," Laura answered. "I'll try and do better. Really I will."

"Don't try for me," said Russell, stroking the nape of her neck. "I like you as you are."

Chapter Ten

AT Marignan airfield, the rain fell in heavy, sad sheets, blackening the tarmac with the reflection of the lead-grey evening sky. The aircraft, already re-fuelled after its flight from Naples, had its lights on, but to the passengers who were waiting to embark it had an alien, inhospitable quality. They stood, incommunicative and self-absorbed, talking when they did in low whispers as if in the ante-room of an operating theatre.

"When do we take off?" a Frenchwoman with two hat-boxes asked an official who was passing.

"At 20.10," he replied. "Ten past eight, Madame."

And she who knew very well the time of the aeroplane's departure, put down her luggage and adjusted her watch as if she had asked him the time and he had given her the answer.

"There's something about flying at night!" she said to Russell who was standing in the queue behind her.

"Yes," he said. "When you fly by day you're in a familiar world, even if the element's unfamiliar. At night, it's a mystery—a complete one."

"Much safer, I'm told," she said for self-assurance.

"Oh, yes," said Russell. "Much!"

By his side, a mother with two children smiled, and a British soldier in civilian clothes said, "Why are we waiting?" and someone tried to light a cigarette and was asked by a stewardess to put it out. When the embarkation orders were given and the sliding-doors opened, the passengers were already in a brisk, determined mood.

Russell took a seat behind the starboard engine, fixed his safety-belt and settled back as the aircraft filled with passengers stowing their wet coats and hand-luggage in the racks with the help of the stewardesses who gave them comfort by their ease and amiability. The fuselage doors were slammed shut and after a moment's whine the engines settled down to a mutter as the aeroplane, bouncing a little, taxied slowly into position at the head of the runway. The cabin was hot, the steamy smell of the drying clothes mingled with a faint odour of leather, old cartons and coffee from the galley.

Russell loosened his tie and shut his eyes. This was the moment of the journey that he liked above all, when the aircraft stood with its engines revving up, one after another, merging into "full power" and the long roar towards the sky. When he looked out of the porthole, he saw the lights of the runway flashing past as the aeroplane, groaning with its heavy load of fuel, struggled its way from the ground.

A few minutes later, they had risen above the clouds, and were flying over white herds of cirrus illumined by the newly risen moon.

The day after tomorrow she too would be home. And Russell remembered her in the taxi at Marseilles, holding his arm and reluctant for him to go, her eyes swollen with tears. "Don't cry," he had said, and she kept saying, "*You will telephone on Wednesday morning? You will*

telephone . . . ?" But already in his mind the coming weeks were spread out like the pages of a diary. After the days of leisure, interrupted only by the formality of a morning's discussion with Maître Canaro in Marseilles, he was eager to begin again the habits of his working life which his meeting with Laura had disrupted.

Thinking of the years since the war, he formed in his mind the image of a mosaic, carefully assembled, stone by stone, each one an act of success, while on the side, hidden, was a box for the discards. The mosaic had the appearance of inevitability, though in fact its origin lay almost in an accident. If he hadn't met Bosworth on a train to Southampton, he would not have been briefed in the K.L.M. case: if he hadn't accepted that brief—as indeed he might not have done since he had already undertaken to appear in another case—he would not have obtained both a professional and a popular reputation as a specialist in aviation law. His book, the Royal Aeronautical Society, Castelnau, Metcalfe, Laura—the links of derivation led back to an accidental train journey when he sat opposite a fat solicitor whom he knew by sight. Bosworth. He had never really liked him till this moment.

The stewardess asked Russell if he wanted anything to drink.

"A whisky and soda," he replied, and the stewardess, moving cautiously down the aisle, went away to get it.

"Like a hospital," said the business-man who had been dozing in the next seat. "They wake you up to see if you want anything." And then he fell asleep again.

The aircraft was flying at about eight thousand feet, and the cabin lights had been switched off. The only illumination came from two or three reading-lights, and the glow

of the moon intermittently appeared and disappeared to starboard. The sound of the engines was like conversation heard in a half-sleep, now fading, now swelling, the assurance of companionship.

Russell started from his somnolence, and became fully awake. Before he left Marseilles, he had received a telegram from his clerk, informing him that Bewsher wanted him to call urgently, and then, as an apology, "if convenient," at the Ministry on Wednesday morning. He tried to think what reason the Parliamentary Secretary could have for this summons. He knew from *The Times* that Wakelin was asking his questions in Parliament on Wednesday afternoon: but equally, his own part in the matter ended when he had given his written opinion to Bewsher. And Russell smiled to himself as he remembered Laura explaining to him in second-hand and inaccurate detail how the Ministry had consulted the Treasury solicitors who had advised in favour of restoring Metcalfe's licence.

But as he conjured up the domestic scene in which Metcalfe, flushed and over-excited in triumph as he knew him to be, informed an admiring Laura of his achievement, Russell felt a familiar pang of exclusion. Like hunger. And then he thought that jealousy was an ugly, ignoble emotion, degrading to those who endured it. And irresistible.

He felt sick, and swallowed the rest of his whisky and soda.

Again he tried to think of his work and to plan the order of his engagements. It might be timely before the Term started again to send a note to the Lord Chancellor which would give him the opportunity, if he so wished, to renew his invitation to call. He ought certainly to get

his advice before committing himself finally to Hoyland. In the House he would add to his reputation; but his income—for the first year, at any rate—would diminish. Yet if it was true that neither the Attorney-General nor the Solicitor-General would be available for office in the next Parliament, he himself, with two or three years of Committee work and help in drafting Bills, combined with his unexacting duties as Recorder and a few carefully chosen appearances in Court, could certainly make himself the natural inheritor of one or other of the Law offices.

He thought of Harlow, Rance, Jukes and Glebe-Carver, who would give their eye-teeth for the chance of a bye-election with the prospect of a safe seat and a job in the Government. Hoyland was a safe seat. He had spoken to Moulder, the Member for Rouse and Collingwood, about it, and he had assured him that although the electorate was fairly small, the party's majority had by some statistical curiosity remained constant for the last twenty years. "You can't go wrong," Moulder had said when they met at the Reform. "Hoyland is a respectable constituency—not like mine. In Rouse, they just float in and float out—work three years at the refineries and off they go. But Hoyland's different. People live there. They pay rates. They go to church. . . . No political meetings between elections, not even on weckdays. . . . Oh, yes, Hoyland's very respectable."

Laura. Her eyes came to his mind. Her steady eyes, her frightened eyes, her drowning eyes. Her drowning eyes in the darkness. Hoyland and Laura. He rejected the question but it recurred. Anxiously and insistently. It would be all right somehow. Somehow! How often had he waved aside the casual optimism of a client who had

formulated his hopes in exactly that way. All right somehow.

Yet Metcalfe was going to be all right and that "somehow" made everything better. The thought that had constantly stirred him with a reluctant shame—that he was abusing the opportunities of Metcalfe's preoccupation with his troubles—had now receded. The improvement in Metcalfe's affairs diminished his own sense of guilt and made Laura more free. The dilemma had become less complex, the alternatives clearer and simpler. Hoyland, the Recordship, Laura.

He spoke her name to himself. Laura. The rest seemed unimportant. Laura—Laura. Laura. The aircraft had begun to lose height, and was bumping a little through low cloud. A few passengers were feeling uncomfortable, and were coughing back an inclination to vomit.

Russell looked across the aisle at a young couple who were holding each other's hands tightly. The man, jaundiced beneath his sunburn, had his forehead resting on the seat in front of him, and the woman who seemed to have brought all the impedimenta of a beach-shop from black pendant earrings to yellow sandals, and wore them, was staring around, unhappy and worried.

Russell went and sat next to them. It was their first flight; he had sinus trouble; they were returning from their first holiday since they were married; she hadn't been sea-sick crossing the Channel; was it always so rough before you landed? Did it get any worse?

Russell distracted them from their discomforts and anxieties with his conversation, and by the time the aircraft thudded along the runway as it landed, the young man had recovered his ruddiness and the girl was confidently making up her face.

"Good-bye," Russell called benevolently to them as the passengers queued to leave the 'plane. He felt tender towards their affection. But they were busy with each other, and either didn't hear him or couldn't be bothered to turn.

Near the flower-shop at the corner of Berkeley Square, Russell met Huberton adjusting a carnation in his button-hole and watched by a companion who sat on his umbrella as if it were a shooting-stick. His dog-tooth hacking-jacket, a contrast with Huberton's formal dark suit, completed the impression of an ephebe at the races in a musical comedy.

"This is Alan," said Huberton; and Alan, with a casual nod to Russell, said, "You've got to pull the calyx through—like mine."

Huberton tugged, and the flower broke. "Never mind," he said, throwing the disintegrating petals into the gutter. "Never mind. And how, my dear Stephen, is the law? . . . I hear you've been away."

"France," said Russell. "What have you been doing?"

"I've been in mourning," said Huberton. "Medor . . ."

"Medor?"

A smile twitched at the edge of Russell's lips.

"No, don't smile," said Huberton, frowning. "I loved that dog as if he were . . ." His eyes began to fill, and Russell said hurriedly, "Poor old Medor! How did it happen?"

Huberton turned his face towards the shop window

with its collection of wreaths and panniers of chrysanthemums, and said simply, "He was suffocated."

And then he repeated the sentence like an epitaph, "He was suffocated. . . . Ah, well!"

"Too bad," said Russell sympathetically. He changed the subject. "I see Wakelin's asking about Metcalfe's licence today."

"Yes," Huberton said reflectively. "So I understand. You know, by the way, I've left Nightfreight. . . ."

"No," said Russell in surprise. "Since when?"

"Oh, yes," said Huberton, his pale blue eyes amused. "I see you don't read your Company Changes. To be quite frank, I was getting rather anxious about Metcalfe. . . ."

"We're blocking the path, Christopher," said Alan petulantly. They were, in fact, standing in the middle of the pavement, and the passers-by were swirling around them like a stream around a rock.

"In what way?" Russell asked, ignoring Alan. "I always believed you thought well of him."

"*'Il ne faut pas exagérer,'* as Bazaine or MacMahon or somebody said in a moment of clarity," Huberton answered with a smile. Metcalfe is the sort of man of whom one says 'He's rather a decent chap'—when all one means is that he's not at that particular moment assaulting, abusing or otherwise damaging some perfectly harmless individual or institution. . . . No, I don't think very highly of Metcalfe." His face had become white with ill-will. "To tell you the truth, my dear Stephen, I came to the conclusion a long time ago that he's a sentimental bully."

"Why sentimental?" Russell asked, although he wanted the conversation to end.

"Sentimental? I had the misfortune to go with him to a Squadron Reunion. The beer and the tears flowed at a more or less equal rate."

Russell looked quickly at Huberton and said, thinking of the dog, "You're against sentiment?"

"I'm against self-pity," said Huberton, "and that's Mr. Metcalfe. Give him a chance, and he'll rub your nose in the gravel. Hurt him a little, and he'll squeal the roof off. . . . No, dear boy, I'm too busy answering for my own shortcomings—which I enjoy. I can't be responsible for Metcalfe's—which I don't. I'm sorry for Laura, poor darling. I'm going to ask her and that son of hers over to Huberton one week-end when Metcalfe's in Jamaica or Bahrein or somewhere. You must join us."

With a synchronised wave, Huberton and Alan walked away, their conversation already in full ripple before they had gone two yards. Russell wondered if Huberton's invitation had contained some allusive intention, but his face had shown no concealed thought nor was it unusual for Huberton to invite him to his house when others of his business colleagues and their wives were present. And, anyhow, Russell thought, as he approached the main entrance to the Ministry, if he knew Huberton, nothing would please him better than to compose a house-party in which one of his friends was cuckolded by another.

After they had spoken for a short time about the County Championship, Bewsher rang for his secretary, and when he appeared, asked him to tell Dr. Springfield that he was ready.

The doctor was very tall—about six foot four, Russell estimated—and entered with a deprecatory stoop. Bewsher introduced him to Russell, and pointed to a high-backed chair, the third in a hierarchy of which his own was the first and Russell's soggy armchair the second. The doctor sat awkwardly, stilted, even when he sat, into an ungainly elevation which didn't correspond with his relative authority.

Bewsher was silent, and Russell waited for him to speak. He was puzzled by the appearance of Dr. Springfield. So far, the Parliamentary Secretary had given him no explanation for his summons. Nor, though Russell was certain that it was concerned with Metcalfe, had Bewsher yet mentioned his name.

"I mustn't keep you too long," said Bewsher. "I'm answering second this afternoon."

"You'll get a good House for the Wakelin questions," said Russell.

"Yes," said Bewsher, "Remarkable chap, Wakelin. He used to be in advertising."

"I thought he still is."

"Yes, self-advertising. You can see the headline forming as he trots out his supplementary. Not too long—not too short—but just right."

"I imagine he'll be preening himself this afternoon."

"What d'you mean?" Bewsher asked sharply.

"I imagine," said Russell, "he'll get a lot of credit from your decision to restore Metcalfe's licence."

"You're mistaken. There's no decision to restore Metcalfe's licence."

"I don't understand. You asked my opinion. . . ."

"Your opinion has since been qualified. . . ."

"Not by me. . . ."

"No, by events."

Bewsher rose, and walked to the window.

"I asked you here, Russell, to tell you precisely that."

He was speaking with his back turned, and Russell said, "Perhaps you'd face me when you're talking to me. . . ."

"Sorry," said Bewsher with a little giggle. "It helps me to think."

He returned to his seat, and Russell said, "What are the new circumstances that have made you change your mind? And what——," he waved interrogatively to Dr. Springfield who clasped his long hands together, and said, "I advise the Minister on certain matters of hygiene—various medical matters—I liaise with Ag. and Fish—I . . ."

"What's that got to do with Metcalfe?" asked Russell.

"Ah, but you wait!" Bewsher said, as if he'd been expecting a counter-move in a game of draughts. "Tell me, Russell, you're an expert in these matters. When did the last outbreak of rabies occur in Britain?"

"Sorry," said Russell curtly, "I——"

"I mean," said Bewsher, "the outbreak caused by the importation of dogs by aircraft."

"That was in 1918. What on earth——?"

Bewsher interrupted him with a gesture of his hand.

"Tell us, Dr. Springfield, about the last case of rabies in your experience."

"There was a case last year," said Springfield, glad of the opportunity to speak. "Fellow from Pakistan. His dog bit him—just a scratch, no scar. Forgot about the whole thing. Two months later when he got home—no, it was ten days after that—he showed symptoms of rabies, and died about a week later."

"Have you seen much rabies in Britain?"

"No—never seen any at all. Last recorded civilian case

was in 1911. But there's been a couple of service-men, I believe, in the last ten years."

"Have you ever seen a case of hydrophobia?"

"I have indeed, Minister. I told you . . ."

"Never mind about that. Tell Mr. Russell."

The doctor looked angrily at Bewsher, and said, "If Mr. Russell——."

Most interesting," said Russell courtcously. "Do tell me."

"It's very unpleasant," Springfield said, "even when you're used to unpleasant sights. I saw three cases in Egypt. The paroxysms and the tetanic spasms—they're bad enough. But you get a sonorous expiration like the barking of a dog. Viscid secretions. Fits of maniacal excitement. It's very ugly, Mr. Russell. Keep away from mad dogs."

"You'd agree, doctor," said Bewsher, "that our quarantine restrictions are perhaps the best means of keeping away from rabies?"

"Oh, yes."

"And that six months—bearing in mind the long incubation period before the disease may show itself—isn't really too long?"

"No. It's just right."

"And one last question—you'd agree that someone who brings in a dog from one of the warm countries where the disease is endemic—you'd agree it's a pretty irresponsible thing to do?"

"For my money," said Dr. Springfield, "anyone who did that—I'd stuff the dog and put the owner himself in quarantine—six months in Pentonville."

"Thank you," said Bewsher, rising and taking the doctor's arm as he led him to the door. "Thank you, doctor."

It has been most educational." And before the doctor could say "good-bye" to Russell, the door had closed behind him.

"I'm afraid I'm still rather foxed," said Russell. "What's the point of the clinical discussion?"

"I was coming to it," said Bewsher, "but I wanted to get rid of Springfield first. I wanted you to know exactly why I've had to reject your favourable opinion of Metcalfe. Take a look at this!"

He pushed a document across the table to Russell, who read it rapidly. It went:

"I, Albert Edward Rose, of 5, Clark's Mansions, Aldeburgh Terrace, W. 2. was engaged in my duties as boilerman at Calthorpe on the morning of Tuesday, September 4th, at approximately half-past seven. Mr. Metcalfe came in and said 'Give me a hand, Ted. I want to burn some rubbish.' I said, 'Where is it?' He said, 'It's a dead dog.' So I got a sack, and got him out of the boot, and put him in the furnacc."

The document had been sworn and witnessed.

"That's extremely interesting," Russell said slowly. "Extremely. But what about it?" He declined the cigarette which Bewsher offered him.

"I'll tell you," said Bewsher after a few puffs. "The dog that Mr. Ted Whatever-his-name-is cremated was an un-quarantined dog flown in by Metcalfe. It died en route."

"What makes you think that it was flown in by Metcalfe? Did anyone see him bring the dog in?"

"Not physically—so to speak."

"I thought not. What were Customs doing? Did they find a dead dog on the aircraft?"

"No," said Bewsher calmly. "Our Customs officers like anyone else are capable of being cheated."

"Well, I would have thought," said Russell, "you would want rather stronger evidence . . ."

"Oh, we've got that," said Bewsher. "You know Huberton, don't you?"

"I know him very well. In fact, I just bumped into him in the Square."

"Yes," said Bewsher. "He's been plaguing me lately. He's been here at least four times in the last week, and I don't want to be rude to the man. My cousin's married to his niece. It's remote enough to call for politeness. . . . Well, to return to Metcalfe. He brought in Huberton's dog—Argus. No, Cyclops."

"Medor."

"That's it, Medor—as was. That was the dog that died."

He had begun to be flippant, but Russell failed to respond to his change of mood, and Bewsher's face, in turn became serious.

"You will have guessed by now," said the Parliamentary Secretary, "that my informer—or to put it more courteously—my informant is of the utmost reliability."

Russell turned the affidavit in his hands before replying, and said, "It's my impression—my very firm impression that if all you've said is true"—he saw Bewsher's mouth compress itself—"Huberton has behaved even more scandalously than Metcalfe."

"And may I ask why?"

"It's clear. Metcalfe broke a regulation. Huberton broke—well, the ordinary standards of decency. He obviously must have asked Metcalfe to bring the dog in. And then, when something went wrong, he simply

ratted on him. It's an unattractive story. I wouldn't have thought, Bewsher, you'd want to take sides too obviously."

Bewsher looked pensive.

"You see," Russell went on, "the British public has two sterling qualities. It likes dogs—you ask any editor what pictures his readers like next to babies—and it likes loyalty."

"You're not suggesting," said Bewsher, "that our courts could dispense with informers?"

"Of course not. But informers are of two kinds—those who do it for money and those who do it for malice. The first lot risk sudden death; the others—well, sometimes it's a form of suicide. Huberton——"

"You mustn't strain your powers of advocacy," Bewsher interrupted him. "We don't want to make heavy weather out of this. And anyhow, there's a certain ambivalence in this case."

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean that Huberton would appear an affectionate, trusting man who loves dogs."

"And Metcalfe?"

"A brute who squeezed a brown-eyed Boxer into the luggage-carrier of a car in inhuman conditions, and having killed him, incinerated the body." Bewsher shuddered slightly. "I'm not saying that's the case," he added, waving Russell's intended protest. "That's how it would appear in the National Press. And as for the quarantine aspect . . ." He looked piously upwards to the yellowing ceiling. "What would the mothers say?"

"My impression," said Russell, "is that Huberton is closely involved."

"That may be," said Bewsher. "But will it seem so? Is

there any reason why he should not have asked Metcalfe to bring the dog into England in a perfectly normal way—Customs, quarantine, the works?”

“That’s quite absurd. Why should Metcalfe. . . .?”

“Ah, there you have it,” said Bewsher, pouncing eagerly on the objection. “Metcalfe is a man who specialises in—how shall I put it?—defiance. He really has a pathological hatred of authority. (I was looking at his R.A.F. papers the other day.) Part of it is adolescent—singularly unattractive in a mature man—part of it is a complete egocentricity. If it serves his purpose, it’s good. If it doesn’t, it’s bad. Those are his simple ethics.”

“It’s not unusual,” Russell said, and again he began to feel himself involved in the thicket of Metcalfe’s vexations, burdened with the share of Laura’s concern, his own guilt deepened by Metcalfe’s troubles.

“It’s not unusual,” said Bewsher, “and our prisons are full of men who hold those views. Look here, Russell . . .” He stood, and for the first time since he had known Bewsher, Russell felt at a disadvantage. The Parliamentary Secretary had an earnest, taut air as he spoke which made Russell listen to him with uneasy concentration.

“Look here, Russell,” he said. “I know you’re fond of Metcalfe. I know you want to help him. And that’s why I asked your opinion . . . but it’s no good. I have to look after the public interest within a certain narrow area. I know it sounds bombastic . . .”

“Not a bit!”

“. . . but it’s a very real responsibility. You are a lawyer. More than that—an embryonic judge. You defend the principles of law not as an abstraction but because the law concerns the practical safeguards of our

society. This fellow Metcalfe . . . ,” he threw up his hands. “He’s quite impossible. He really is a public menace. Won’t play the game—won’t stick to the rules. He’s quite impossible. . . . It’s no good. . . . This afternoon I propose to give Wakelin a temporising reply. I will then send him the full facts privately.”

Russell was silent.

“Naturally,” Bewsher went on, as if with an afterthought, “he doesn’t see it. He feels hard done by. He reminds me of the story of the undergraduate who was sent down from his college for ungentlemanly conduct.”

“I imagine I’ve heard it,” said Russell.

“The President sent for him,” said Bewsher, forging on, “and said, ‘I am sending you down for ungentlemanly conduct, Mr. Jones.’ ‘But I don’t see how my conduct was ungentlemanly,’ said Mr. Jones. ‘Ah,’ said the President, ‘that’s precisely why I’m sending you down!’”

Bewsher ended his anecdote in explosive, spluttering laughter that made him dribble over his chin. He wiped the ooze away with his handkerchief. “Don’t you think it funny?” he asked Russell who was surveying him coldly.

“No,” said Russell. “The President in your story seems to me to be a mean little prig—a prig, what is worse, without charity.”

“Oh, really!” said Bewsher.

Russell took up his hat.

Chapter Eleven

AFTER the summer's play, the grass had a dried look with brown patches at the base-lines. On Russell, as he watched the game between Laura and Peter, the pendulum of white balls, multiplying and diminishing as in a series of mirrors along the row of courts, had a soporific effect. He sat on the green bench by the net, thinking that these days before the Law Sittings began again were like a respite, an adjournment before judgement, and that whatever he decided, would be as irrevocable as death, because whatever he decided would be a renunciation and every renunciation was a renunciation of part of life. He looked at Laura, hot and vital and familiar, and decided that he could only contemplate giving her up when he had the certainty of her presence.

"That's set," she said, leaning exhausted against the netting by the path. "Wake up, Stephen! You stopped scoring."

"Well done," said Russell as an assurance of his interest. They assembled with their rackets at the bench, and Peter said. "You're very good, mummy, but you *will* drop the head of your racket."

"I sec," said Laura meekly.

"And then again," Peter went on, "when you do a back-hand, you sort of let your racket dangle—like this."

He demonstrated.

"Yes," said Laura. "I always forget whether to put my right or my left foot forward."

"The thing to do," said Russell, "is not to think."

"Oh, yes," said Peter sharply, "you've got to think. Otherwise you'll never get it right. You're just like Jenny."

He turned away from Russell.

"Your trouble, mummy, is that you spend too much time worrying how you look when you play."

"Peter doesn't approve of my shorts," Laura explained. "He thinks that at my age . . ."

Russell looked down at Laura's long thighs with their few, scarcely perceptible hairs bleached golden by the sun and when he looked up again, he saw that Peter was staring at him hostilely.

"I think your shorts are charming," he said to Laura. "Quite charming. When d'you think women should stop wearing shorts, Peter?"

Peter reddened, and kicked his racket with his toe. "Haven't the faintest idea," he said.

"Peter is quite convinced," said Laura, as Russell helped her on with her blue cardigan, "that women cease to be interesting at thirty. What do you think, Stephen?"

"I think," said Russell, "that that's when they begin. . . . Come on, Peter. Let's have a single."

"I'll umpire," said Laura.

"All right," said Russell. "Whose side are you on?"

"Both. I'm neutral."

"That's a contradiction," said Russell, sending a ball

down to Peter. "But I see what you mean. Like to serve, Peter?"

Peter who had been carefully coached at school played a steady, controlled game with hard drives from the base-line. Occasionally, he would hit the ball to Russell's back-hand, and then come up to the net with an angled volley. Soon he was leading three-one, and Russell, good-humouredly, conceded a point when the ball struck the net and fell just outside the rim of the side-line.

"Good shot!" he called, but Peter was already crouching grimly, waiting to receive his service. Russell smiled to Laura, and she, smiling back to him, said, "now then, Stephen. You'll have to improve!"

Involuntarily, Russell who had been restraining the force of his service, followed through with the weight of his body, and the ball kicked past Peter before he had even drawn his racket fully back.

"Sorry!" he said.

Peter didn't answer but moved into position to receive the new service.

Again Russell served hard, and as he did so, he felt a spasm of irritation with himself that, provoked by Laura's casual taunt, he was playing as earnestly against a school-boy as if he were playing against a man of his own strength.

Peter returned the ball with a scraping shot that just cleared the net, and Russell reverted to the friendly, careless style of the earlier games. Peter drove his next two balls into the net, and the score was three-two. But as they changed over, Russell noticed that Peter's face had the closed, set expression of someone on trial—pale, sweating and self-absorbed.

"Hard pounding, Peter!" he said, but Peter didn't

answer. He was already bouncing a ball and waiting to serve.

After a few long rallies in which Peter made desperate and successful recoveries, Russell changed his tactics. To the swinging base-line drives, he replied with short chop-shots. They fell limply out of his opponent's reach; and when Peter tried to anticipate them by rushing to the net, Russell lobbed high to his back-hand instead.

At four-three in Russell's favour, he ballooned a ball slowly and carefully to the base-line. Peter rushed back, waiting for it to drop. It fell two inches inside the line, but, scooping to return it over his left shoulder, he missed completely.

"Out!" said Peter.

"Too bad," said Russell who, running to the net, had seen exactly where the ball had fallen. When Laura tried to meet his eye he looked away. He overdrove the next two shots, and the score was four-all.

In the ninth game, he again played with a carefully varied style, and Peter failed to score a point. His hair had fallen over his face, his shirt was sticking out and his shorts had begun to slip.

"Put your shirt in, darling," said Laura.

"Oh, do be quiet, mummy," Peter muttered. He missed the ball, and called out to Russell, "Do you mind if we have that one again? I'm afraid mummy . . ."

"Of course," said Russell.

He served; Peter returned the ball, and Russell volleyed at the net. He could hear the choking, sobbing sound of Peter's breath as he tried ineffectively to reach the ball that raised a sputter of chalk as it hit the side-line.

For a few moments Peter rested against the netting

where he had chased the ball, and then said, "Just out, I'm afraid!"

"But, darling . . ." Laura began.

"That's all right. It was miles out," said Russell. "About three inches."

After that, he indifferently let Peter win the next two games for set.

They sat relaxing on the bench.

"Put your sweater on, Peter," said his mother.

Without speaking, Peter, who was still exhausted after the strenuous set, drew on his sweater and wiped his face with a towel.

"That's a terrifying back-hand of yours," said Russell. "You'll soon be playing at Wimbledon."

"I doubt it," said Peter. "Tennis isn't really my game. I prefer squash. Pity we couldn't have had a four."

"Does your husband play?" Russell asked.

"No," said Laura. "He loathes the game. He thinks it's rather effete."

"Actually," said Peter, "he's a jolly good player. Make rings round any of us. I'm going to get an orange-squash."

"We'll all go and have tea," said Laura.

Russell put on his jacket, and with Peter a few steps ahead, they walked slowly towards the pavilion.

"I'm afraid it hasn't been a great success," said Russell.

"Well," said Laura with a shrug in her voice. "I wanted you to meet. . . . I'm sure he really likes you."

Russell guided her onto the path with his hand in the small of her back.

"I don't think he does. Did you see his face when we were playing?"

"Yes."

"He was very resentful."

"I don't think so, darling."

"Oh, yes. Resentful and jealous. I don't blame him."

"Perhaps when he gets to know you better . . ."

"What then?"

"Well, he must like you."

They paused for a few moments while Peter went into the bar to get his drink.

"He will never like me," said Russell conclusively.

"For him I'll always be an intruder, butting in, breaking up the established scene. . . ."

"But he knows—he knows better than anyone how intolerable it's all become."

"That's all the more reason for him to feel bitter about anyone who seems to him to be making it worse."

All around them tennis players and their friends were sauntering and chattering gaily. Above the pavilion that now threw a long shadow over three courts, the club flag and pennants had begun to flap in the breeze; and a new sound of teacups and rattling saucers entered the medley of leisurely noise.

"We could be so happy," said Laura, standing in front of him at the bottom of the tea-lawn near the blue-and-white striped awning.

"Yes," said Russell.

"And we've got to look at each other as if we're strangers."

Russell smiled down at her. "Hello, darling," he said. "Are you a stranger?"

"No, I'm not. I'm not. Why don't they leave us alone?"

"Who?"

"Everyone—the whole world. Oh, Stephen, we can't go on like this."

"Well," he said, "what do you want to do? I've been thinking, Laura. . . ."

"Yes?" she asked eagerly.

"Would you come away with me?"

"You know I would."

"When?"

"Any time you want me to."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes—tomorrow."

He waited for her reply, and she said, "Let's walk on darling. I can see the Dogger-James—over there on the left."

"Well, Laura?" Russell asked as they moved on.

"Of course, I will," said Laura. "But . . ."

"I asked you if you'll come away with me tomorrow."

"Where to?" Laura asked.

"To New York—I have some work to do there."

She hesitated, and then she said, "You wouldn't want me to leave everything just flat—like that?"

"I don't want you to do anything. I'm only asking you what you want to do?"

"Stephen," she said, clutching his arm, "I must get Peter and Jennifer back to school. You know that. You wouldn't think much of me if I . . ."

"No, of course not," he said. "And Roger?"

"That's nothing," she said decisively. "All that's over. It's finished."

"So that if it weren't for Peter and Jenny you would be ready to leave tomorrow?"

They had reached the end of the dahlia walk that followed the line of the privet-hedge, and turned back through the idling crowds towards the pavilion.

"Yes," she said. "Stephen, you're examining me as if you were in court."

"Well," he said, "we're all in court—in a sense. . . . Tell me about Roger."

"What shall I tell you?" she asked. "He's so much more cheerful now that his wretched licence is being restored. It makes life rather easier for me at home too."

"You mean all is well again," said Russell not looking at her.

"No, I didn't say or mean that. All I mean is that . . . oh, well, you know—he's better tempered. It's as simple as that."

They walked on in silence till Russell said, "Laura—I have something rather unpleasant to tell you."

"What is it?" she asked, stopping short, alarmed.

Russell hesitated, and then, as if making a decision, said, "Your husband isn't going to get his licence back."

"Not getting his licence back?" she repeated incredulously. "But, Wakelin——"

"You can forget about him," said Russell. "Roger is not going to get his licence back."

He saw her unhappiness, and said, "I'm terribly sorry, darling. I'm sorry for him."

"But why——?" she began.

"I don't know," said Russell. "I think it's a stone we'd better not lift too publicly. It's got something to do with an unquarantined dog."

"Medor," she said. "It's Medor."

"Did—you know about it?" He was watching her face closely.

"Yes," she said. "I did. But, Stephen darling, he was only trying to do a good turn for a friend. It's so unjust to penalise him for his generosity. . . . It's all so silly. Poor

old Medor! You remember him, dribbling all over the place. . . .”

She was speaking agitatedly now. “How could they imagine he had rabies? He was obviously a healthy dog. It’s so unfair—so unfair!”

She had taken her hand from Russell’s arm, and was clutching her handbag tightly. “Don’t you think it unfair, Stephen?”

“No, I don’t,” said Russell. “You’ve got to have principles and rules of conduct. I wish you’d told me about it.”

She stopped again and looked him straight in the eyes. “And don’t you think there are times—exceptional times—when there are other considerations to be taken into account?”

“What sort of times?” Russell asked.

“Our own times, for example,” said Laura. “If you or I were to be judged—what then? . . . You can’t have justice without compassion and understanding. All Roger did was to help a friend. Is that criminal?”

“I think it’s getting rather cold,” said Russell. “Shall I drive you back?”

Her face became submissive. “Don’t be angry with me,” she said. “Please, Stephen!”

“I’m not angry,” he said sulkily.

“Well, whatever you are. . . .”

“I’m not anything,” he said. “But since you defend your husband with such brio, there is no more for me to say.”

Peter came to meet them, bounding down the grass slope from the pavilion, his equanimity restored by his satisfying drink.

“Darling,” he said, to his mother, “this sweater of mine

is unpeeling." He tugged at a long strand. "Will you have it mended?"

"I'll post it to you," said Laura, putting her arm around his shoulder.

"No hurry," said Peter with a quick look at Russell. "Bring it down with daddy when you come for half-term."

When they were having tea together their ease returned. Peter had left with a friend of his own age, and Laura, as if relieved of a responsibility, no longer had the slight frown which, Russell noticed, was characteristic of her expression in the presence of Metcalfe and her son.

Below them on the croquet-lawn, an elderly woman in flat-heeled shoes was practising shots with the absorption of one totally unconscious of being observed. She measured the distance with her mallet, eyed the ball and then drove it with a sharp click through the hoop. Contented she surveyed the next stage of her private game. Holding the ball firmly under one foot, she drove the ball of an invisible antagonist towards the boundary grass.

"How nice," said Laura, "to be able to dispose of your aggressiveness in croquet!"

"It's a very savage game," said Russell.

"It makes agreeable tea-time music," she said. "It makes me feel so remote from London—that copper beech——"

"The Hammersmith chimney——"

"Don't be disenchanting. I like that chimney—it's monitory."

"In what way?"

"Well," Laura smiled wily. "It's a reminder of real life—among the teacups the chimney. . . . Do you think we could go to Cambridge together one day? I'd love to walk with you over Midsummer Meadows. . . . And perhaps while it's still warm, we could take a punt—can you punt?"

"Yes."

"—and go up the Cam—we could have a picnic under the willows."

"Have you ever done it before?"

She hesitated. "Yes—there were four of us—years ago. And I thought then how wonderful it would be to do all that with someone I loved. . . . You know, at our age, darling, there isn't much new to do. Not in things—or even places. But when you love someone, everything becomes new. It's as if you'd never done any of it before. And in a sense, you haven't. Because when you love, it transmutes everything. It makes everything shine and glow—the dullest things. And when things are beautiful in themselves——"

She spread out her hands inarticulately, and he enclosed her left hand in his and held it on his knee below the table.

"All right, my darling," he said, "we'll go to Cambridge together while it's still warm."

"It's September the sixteenth already," said Laura. "I've known you forty-two days and seven hours."

"I've known you a whole summer and part of autumn," said Russell. "It sounds longer. It makes everything seem more secure."

"Will you make a pact with me?" Laura asked.

"Yes," said Russell. "Anything you like."

"It's very rash of you. Are you quite certain?"

"Yes."

"Well, promise you'll meet me on my birthday—on December the fourteenth—for lunch——"

"Of course I will. Where shall we meet?"

She reflected for a short while, and then said, "Let's meet at Burlington House—on the steps of the Royal Academy—where we met when you came back from Rome."

Russell took out his blue diary, and opened it at December 14th.

"You write it," he said; and carefully in her gothic schoolgirl handwriting, she wrote, "L.—lunch—one o'clock—Royal Ac."

He held it open, waiting for the ink to dry, and she said, playing with a teacup, "I wonder where we'll be next December. I wonder what we'll be doing."

"I imagine," said Russell, "we'll be doing approximately the same as we're doing now. We'll be talking, and imagining how pleasant it will be to be together. You'll be saying that love is a unique and transcendent experience, and that you'd do anything in the world for its sake—except, of course, anything that might interfere with your children's school holidays—or alternatively, their School Certificate or whatever they call it nowadays."

As he spoke, Laura's eyes widened with a sense of affront, but he went on, "You'll be saying that you prefer summer to winter because you like cotton dresses better than fur coats and that——"

"Don't go on," said Laura beseechingly.

Russell took her hand in his, and said earnestly, "Laura—darling Laura, we can't continue like this. We're too old for hole-in-the-corner meetings—too old to think it fun to hide and pretend. You come straight to me from his side——"

Laura looked away, but he turned her face towards him, his hand under her chin.

"No," he said, "it's no use pretending. You come straight to me from his side——"

"It's not like that," said Laura, averting her face again. "You can't understand. It's not like that."

Then she looked at him with her eyes now steadfast and calm, and said, "You must believe me."

"How can I believe you?" said Russell. An anguish of scepticism in which his doubts struggled with a longing for reassurance, welled up in him and churned itself into a resentful despair.

"How can I believe you?" he repeated. "The words and the facts—you come straight to me from his side—I'm sorry. I've said it already. . . ."

"You've said it twice before."

"That doesn't make it less true. Those are the facts, and your words don't tally with them."

For a few moments she didn't answer. Then she said simply, "I've only got words to tell you. How else can I tell you? What do you want me to do?"

"Your tea is getting cold," said Russell. "Will you have this cake with the currants?"

"No, darling, I want you to tell me—what else can I do to prove I love you? . . . You can't mean some of the things you've been saying."

Russell offered her a cigarette which she refused. "You can't really mean any of that."

"Why can't I?" he asked.

"Because everything you say about me—about my hesitations and my responsibilities and everything—it's all true in detail—all except about Roger—and yet it adds up to—a caricature."

She took up her handbag from the table, and began to rise. "I think we'd better go, Stephen," she said.

"Very well," said Russell, and he waved to a waiter for his bill. While they sat in silence, a tall man, accompanied by a thin, well-dressed woman whose eyebrows, half-natural, half-marked in pencil, gave her a theatrical air, came over to greet Laura.

"Gerald!" she exclaimed.

Her face brightened as she shook his hand, and Russell observed with a pang its transformation from brooding withdrawal into a relaxed happiness. He had risen, waiting to be introduced, but Laura was already talking vivaciously about unfamiliar people, while Gerald's wife who had somehow become diverted to another table, was being addressed by a group of young tennis players as "Darling".

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Laura. "This is Stephen Russell—Gerald Marlow. We haven't met since 1952——"

"1951," said Marlow—"at Duino."

"Duino?"

"Yes, Duino. You know, near Trieste. The Duino Elegies——"

With his fair hair and his light brown skin, Marlow had a triumphant, successful air as he leaned towards Laura with his hand on the back of her chair.

"I didn't know you'd been to Trieste," Russell said to Laura.

"Didn't I tell you?" Laura said. "It was when they had the Conference of the Alliance Aéronautique. It was too dreadful. We flew in from Rome, and they put us up at that wonderful castle—the Duino castle itself where Rilke wrote the Elegies. It's so romantic—it goes right down into the sea."

"Used to bathe from my room every morning," said Marlow.

"You were all right. You were on the Committee. We had to climb—I'm not sure whether it was two or three hundred stairs."

Laura's face became flushed and excited as she remembered. "We had a room—Roger and I—right above the most beautiful lily-pond you've ever seen. . . . Don't look sceptical, Stephen. It really was."

"My expression," said Russell, "was one of dedicated interest."

"Well, anyhow," said Laura, "the first night we were there—there was a storm—and we'd left our window open on to the lily-pond."

"It sounds very attractive," said Russell.

"The idea was . . ." Laura said. She was faltering in her anecdote because she had observed the change in Russell's expression. "The idea was . . . Oh, anyhow, it's a boring story."

"No, do go on," said Russell.

"Well," she said desperately, "the storm drove all the mosquitoes from the lily-pond into our bedroom, and the next day after a night of sheer torture, we woke up—or rather we got up—bitten from head to foot."

"From head to foot," Russell repeated gravely. "That must have been very painful."

"Laura took it very well," said Marlow cheerfully. "We lent her our anti-moustique. It worked like magic. . . ."

"My dear," said a new voice, the voice of Marlow's wife, "I can't have you flirting with Gerald. You're so much prettier than I am. And in front of Roger, too. Fie on you—as I sometimes had to say. Roger, you must

control your wife better. Come on, Gerald, and *au revoir à tout le monde!*"

She took her husband's arm, and waved farewell as she urged him towards the gravel path.

"You do behave extr . . .," he could be heard saying, his voice fading in retreat.

Russell looked sullen.

"'In front of Roger too'—that's almost the end! Do you think I look like Roger?"

"I'm sorry, darling," said Laura. "Don't let her upset you. She was a rep actress, and then had a couple of parts on T.V. before she married Gerald. She's quite barmy. She was quite impossible in Trieste. I really don't know how Gerald puts up with her."

"Well," said Russell, rising, "perhaps Gerald finds her more attractive in private than you do in public."

"I hope you don't find her attractive," said Laura, taking his arm. He disengaged it.

"I had the impression," he said stiffly, "that she was more concerned about you."

"Really," said Laura. "I hardly spoke to her."

"That's exactly what I mean," said Russell. "You seemed to know her husband so much better."

He stopped near the row of cars, and said, "I'm not going to be angry, Laura. I just want to know how well you know this man."

"But, darling," she said. "I've scarcely spoken to him except with Roger—he deals in aircraft-finance, and . . ."

"I know all about that," he said brusquely. "What about the times when Roger wasn't there?"

"What times?"

"You're temporising. . . . The times you just told me about."

"But there weren't any times. . . ."

"You said a moment ago that there were."

Her eyes became blurred with tears, and she said, "We've so many real things to be unhappy about. Why do you want to quarrel with me about something so fantastic and absurd?"

"Did you swim with him?"

"No—yes—once. . . ."

"I see," he said and began to walk quickly on, a pace ahead of her.

"We all bathed—at the plage in Trieste. . . . Please stop, Stephen. You're destroying us—both of us."

She took his arm again, and said, standing still and slowly. "I swear to you, my darling, that there's never been—or will be—nor do I want there to be anything at all between Marlow and myself. . . . Look at me, darling."

He looked into her face.

• "And I swear to you," she went on, "that you have no need to be jealous of him or of anyone on earth—not of him or Peter or Jennifer or Roger—no one in the world. Do you believe me?"

He didn't answer.

"Do you believe me?" she repeated urgently. "It's terribly important for me to know."

Without replying, he kissed her on the cheek. She looked at him uncertainly, and then they walked in silence to the car.

Chapter Twelve

SCRUPULOUSLY, the Chancellor, Lord Atherbury, Sconfined their promenade to the area of the terrace beyond the oak notice board inscribed Peers Only. He walked with careful steps, every now and again stretching his legs over the shallow puddles that still lingered from the early rain in the tessellated inlays of the flagstones. A few Members of Parliament were strolling in the morning sun, but they politely averted their eyes from the unfamiliar sight of the Chancellor, wigless, in this semi-public place.

"I am always delighted," said Lord Atherbury, "by the Venetian quality of St. Thomas's Hospital at this hour of day. It's like a triple palazzo on a canal."

Russell paused at the parapet to observe the scene—the white launches moored by the embankment, the churning of the waters as two barges lumbered past, and over Westminster Bridge, a bus, diminished and preoccupied.

"Here," said the Lord Chancellor, "is the rampart and the moat. Behind us,"—and he looked up at the narrow, perpendicular windows of the House of Lords—"is the fortress—the Citadel of the Superannuated where ex-Prime Ministers and tired jurists dodder away their final days."

In his black suit, the Lord Chancellor had the appearance of a company-director who having reached the retirement age still hoped for an extension. His face was white like the cropped hair above his temples. His jowls, pendent and symmetrical, had been smoothly shaved till they shone. And he held himself with an impressive, erect deportment. But when he walked, he limped slightly; to raise himself to his bulky height of six foot two, to square his shoulders in balance of his height, and finally, to move it all forward was a labour. The Lord Chancellor was seventy-three.

"There are men," he said, "who with great effort, after a lifetime of striving, haul themselves to the ledge where they aspire. And they lie there—exhausted, their eyes glazed—content. And there are others who are exactly the same—and having arrived, wonder what it was all about. I am of those."

The Lord Chancellor waved his freckled hand towards the river. "It flows on," he said, "and I go out with the party in office."

"That, sir, doesn't seem imminent," said Russell.

The Lord Chancellor replied, "There's no assurance in these matters. I am a Minister like any other even though I take precedence after the Archbishop of Canterbury. At one time, I would not have exchanged my earnings as a lawyer and my membership of the Commons for twice the prestige of being prolocutor of the Lords. It is a sterile activity—to sit on the Woolsack. I put the Question but I can't rule on Order. No, Stephen. Give me your youth—the vista of life in front of you—and you can have my wig. I'm delighted you're coming into the House."

Russell's grey flannel sleeve rested on the sandstone

balustrade next to the black sleeve of the Lord Chancellor, and he regretted that he hadn't changed for this interview into more formal clothes. He had hovered on the fringe of that intention when he rose, but the suit he wore was the one Laura liked best of all his clothes, and to please her, he had decided to wear it for their luncheon meeting. Now he felt a sense of irritation with himself. He had, unsolicited, gratified a whim which he attributed to her though she had no part in it. It was unfair, he recognised, but his resentment persisted.

"You will be happy in the House," the Lord Chancellor went on. "You're the right age. It would have pleased your father."

"Yes," said Russell. "He would have liked it very much. He was a patient man—he accepted everything life gave him whether it was good or bad. I only once heard him express regret. I'd never realised it. It was just before he died."

The Lord Chancellor was shaking his head in time with the sentences.

"I used to go and visit him regularly when he lived at Godalming," said Russell. "He was always interested in the outside world—cricket, the Courts, Parliamentary debates. But one day he said, 'If I had my life all over again, do you know what I'd like to be?' And I said 'No.' And he said, 'I'd like to be a back-bencher—not a Minister—just a back-bencher—at the heart of things—listening quietly—occasionally making a speech on Fridays.'"

"He would have made a poor back-bencher," said the Lord Chancellor "but an admirable Cabinet Minister. Your father was one of the most intelligent and kindly men I've ever known. He helped me greatly with his

modesty and serenity. I wish I could have done more for him."

"He chose his own way of life," said Russell. "He always said an adult man must be ready to accept the consequences of his behaviour."

"He endured the consequences of his own. I don't think he liked them. . . . I believe, my dear Stephen, that we can now leave the glacié and make a sortie. I see that Wakelin has left the terrace."

They began to walk together over the steaming flagstones towards the Speaker's House.

"When is your adoption meeting?" the Chancellor asked.

"I'm afraid," said Russell, "it hasn't gone as far as that."

"Well, get it over—get it over. They may change their minds."

"It isn't that, sir, I haven't quite made up my mind myself."

"Are you thinking of money?"

"Good Lord, no."

"Why not? When I was your age, I was always thinking of money. What other consideration can there be for a person like yourself?"

"I have a few commitments——"

"That's exactly why I wanted to see you."

The Lord Chancellor who previously had been talking to Russell in a tone of light banter, became grave.

"Let us sit on one of those benches," he said. "There's a matter I must discuss with you, and I only have ten minutes before my next appointment."

Through the door leading to the Harcourt Room, Wakelin who had made an outflanking movement along

the corridor that ran parallel with the terrace, emerged with a surprised smile.

"Good morning, Henry," he said to the Lord Chancellor, intercepting them as they made for the bench. "Bored with Olympus?"

"Hello, Wakelin," said the Lord Chancellor—in the twenty-three years that he had been in the Commons before his elevation to the Lords, he had never called Wakelin by his Christian name. "I sometimes like a quiet walk on the lower slopes. This is Stephen Russell—one of our more distinguished young lawyers . . . Wakelin."

"Yes," said Wakelin reflectively, looking at Russell with a sustained stare. "Yes . . . I know of Mr. Russell. . . ."

Russell looked back distastefully at the patchwork of red veins on Wakelin's face, and said, "I'm never quite sure whether that's a help or not. . . ."

"Oh, very helpful," said Wakelin. "One doesn't have to start learning the scales."

"And what are you up to now?" asked the Lord Chancellor, turning to badinage from the annoyance in his original greeting. "What wretched Minister are you hounding into an ignominious cycle of confession, apology and resignation?"

Wakelin glanced at Russell and said complaisantly, "Well, I've just 'done' the Minister of Supply—I'm in process of 'doing' the Minister of Transport—and next week——"

"We will leave next week to look after itself," said the Lord Chancellor frigidly, and Russell saw how a tic began beneath his left eye. "And now, Wakelin, if you will excuse us!"

"I'm very sorry," said Wakelin, affronted. "I didn't wish to intrude."

"Not a bit of it," said Atherbury, recovering from his access of anger. "Not a bit of it. I can never think of the terrace without thinking of you . . ."

Wakelin half smiled.

" . . . walking up and down . . . projecting good-humour . . . making the terrace an annexe to the Chamber, a forum, an academy."

Wakelin's smile broadened, and he said, "It's rather like an old school, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the Lord Chancellor, "in which one tends to remain in the Sixth too long. Delighted to have seen you, my dear Wakelin. Delighted!"

Wakelin edged backwards, half smiling again, and with an awkward wave to Russell, withdrew towards the Terrace Bar.

"Ghastly fellow," said the Lord Chancellor. "He'd murder his mother for a headline. When I was in the House, he used to spend half his time lobbying the Lobby men."

"He's pretty effective, though, isn't he?" Russell asked, looking after Wakelin's retreating figure.

"In a sense," said Atherbury. "He's a pachyderm. That's a certain advantage for a politician. He specialises in abuse—the rash and privileged statement. And when he is rebuked, the wound lasts a day. His thick skin heals as quickly as that. If I had the ill-luck to meet him tomorrow, he would have forgotten how I sent him packing today."

Russell said, "That's the sort of thing that puts me off politics."

"What sort of thing?"

"Its opportunism—the basic insincerity of personal

relations that it produces—you know, Chancellor, the smiling through clenched teeth.”

“That’s true,” said the Lord Chancellor, stretching his legs as they took their places on the bench overlooking the river. “And yet it’s not entirely true. Parliament is a combination of Chartres and Versailles—a place where men seek power through prayer and intrigue.”

Russell opened his mouth to interrupt, but the Lord Chancellor continued, “The pursuit of power isn’t bad in itself. Power should be the servant of virtue.”

“And is it?”

“Curiously enough,” said the Lord Chancellor, “I believe that in British politics it is. I’m not speaking of the individual Member—Heaven knows, we share all the vices. But we’re elevated by the institution. If you leave a bowl of brackish water in the sun long enough, it becomes purified. I think that’s how it is with us.”

“The doctrine of the perfectible Member. . . .”

“No. Of the perfectible system. . . . I’ve no doubt at all that there has never been in history a better institution of government than our own Parliament as it has been fashioned in centuries of experience. To belong to it, Stephen, is a great honour—a great privilege—a great opportunity. Why do you hesitate?”

Russell was silent for a few moments, contemplating a launch that was chugging its way on the far side of the river. Then he said, “I am hesitant, Chancellor—I am hesitant because I am not sure if I am equipped for political responsibility.”

“In what way are you deficient?”

Russell didn’t answer, and the Chancellor took out his fob-watch to see the time.

“You know,” the Chancellor said, breaking the silence

with the beginning of a laugh, "you remind me very much of myself when I was your age."

Russell continued to stare in front of him.

"I was Chancellor of the Diocese—Bailey taught me at school, and appointed me when he became Bishop. It was a curious appointment. I had to preside over the Bish's Court——"

"I hope it was a sinecure."

"Not exactly, although, I must say, his clergy were singularly virtuous—that was no problem at all. But when he died and a new Bishop was appointed—I don't know whether it was through ecclesiastical contamination—I suddenly had an attack of conscience."

Russell looked up at the Lord Chancellor who had paused abstractedly.

"Yes," he went on after a few seconds, "I had a crisis. I had to administer the oath to the incoming Bishop, and I felt unfitted—unworthy."

He took out a cigarette-case, and without offering one to Russell, chose a cigarette and lit it. "I wanted to resign—even talked it over with the provost and the Archdeacon of Canterbury—I thought that was going far enough. They pooh-poohed my scruples."

"And then?"

"The day of the enthronement arrived—a wonderful day. The Cathedral was full—the robes, the fanfares, the anthems, the processions—you must seek out an enthronement, Stephen, after a suitable demise. It's a transcendent occasion."

He puffed his cigarette, and said, "And then came the moment when I had to administer the oath—and I knew that I couldn't do it."

"I don't recall . . ." Russell began.

"No, there is nothing to recall. There was no scene—no scandal. No drama. Nothing. I administered the oath, the Bishop swore it, the congregation rose and all present sang. . . . My crisis of conscience was over. I felt there could never have been one more suitable to swear in a bishop than myself."

Russell laughed. "I don't see, sir," he said, "that my experience is comparable with yours."

"No," said the Lord Chancellor, "not in its apparent terms. But—look here, Russell—"

He sat up stiffly, and involuntarily, Russell uncrossed his legs and sat up too.

"I have something disagreeable to put to you."

Russell waited.

"I've received a communication—never mind from whence," Lord Atherbury continued with a frown, "suggesting that you gave an opinion in the case of Metcalfe—the Attorney-General as well as the Minister of Transport are involved in this—without disclosing—how shall I put it?—your interest."

"I have no financial interest whatsoever in any of Metcalfe's undertakings."

"No," said the Lord Chancellor slowly. "No financial interest. I realise that. But other interests—let us not be equivocal—you have some interest, I understand, in Mrs. Metcalfe."

Russell began to rise, but the Lord Chancellor put out his hand.

"I am not prepared to discuss Mrs. Metcalfe," said Russell. He could hear the thump of his heart like a muffled drum.

"Oh, but you must," said the Lord Chancellor, "you really must."

"I see no compulsion. . . ."

"Oh, yes. I have put my trust in you. I have given you preferment—there were others—men senior to you—whom I might have chosen for the Recordership. You can't begin with a sordid——"

"Sordid?"

"Yes, sordid—divorce is sordid—you can't begin your career as a Recorder with a sordid divorce case in which you are a principal and guilty actor. A judge shouldn't start as a defendant."

"Who has given you this—this outrageous information?"

"If it is outrageous, you alone are responsible. But if it's untrue, you have my profoundest apologies—my only justification being that I address you in some sense *in loco parentis*."

"Who told you that I may be involved in a divorce case?"

"You must not press me, Stephen, to answer that question. You may be sure I did not speak lightly. Is it true?"

"No."

"Might it seem to be true?"

Russell hesitated, and then said, "I can imagine—yes, it might seem true."

"That's really what I mean. I'm not offering you a sermon—not even giving you advice. I'm merely pointing out some ineluctable facts. Divorce at this stage, Stephen, means—not death, but at least a serious illness to your career—perhaps ultimately one from which there's no recovery. And if it's thought that you intervened on behalf of a respondent for the benefit of her husband, you will be judged not as a Quixote but rather as what the French call a *maquereau*."

"I'm sorry," said Russell rising. "I am not prepared, Lord Chancellor, to listen to these imputations. I am sorry you've repeated them, even with the best of intentions. If I assure you there's no truth in them——"

"No truth at all?"

"None at all. I give you my word—there's not a fragment of truth in any suggestion that I helped Metcalfe because of his wife."

Russell spoke the last sentence standing and in an emphatic voice."

"Very well," said the Lord Chancellor, "I will venture in those circumstances to offer you some advice. Don't involve yourself excessively. . . . You see, the Opposition—and for that matter some of our own fellows who are always looking for a stick to beat the P.M. with—are trying to whoop up this Metcalfe business into a case against the Government."

"That doesn't necessarily make Metcalfe's case invalid."

"No, of course not. Metcalfe's case is invalid because of the facts. That's all. I must warn you, Stephen, that if Wakelin were to get his way, and there were some sort of Court of Enquiry—a public one—Metcalfe would be worse off at the end than he is now."

"Why?"

"Why? Because then, the Minister of Transport might be obliged to produce some unattractive evidence about Metcalfe's past behaviour. . . ."

"The dog?"

"I know nothing about a dog," said the Chancellor, brushing his intervention aside. "I'm talking of his war-time record. . . ."

"It's excellent."

"I will not dwell on the matter. I am advising you,

Stephen—indeed, I am warning you not to commit yourself unduly.”

The Lord Chancellor hoisted himself to his feet, and said amiably, “Why do we delay in drinking a sherry? You will come to my room. Of course, when you’re in the House, I will entertain you no more—except perhaps on State occasions.”

“I was so afraid in case you didn’t come,” said Laura, pressing closer to Russell as they drove northward from London. “When it was half-past one, I was convinced you wouldn’t. And there was some dreadful man who was circling round me on the steps.”

“What did you do?” Russell asked, smiling. He felt released by the speed of the car, and accelerated to nearly seventy miles an hour.

“I pursed my lips,” said Laura. “That wasn’t terribly difficult—I’d gone through all the stages—surprise, anger, anxiety and despair. And then you drove into the courtyard, everything was all right again. . . . Was the Lord Chancellor horrid?”

“No. He gave me a lesson in the advantages of a seat in the House.”

“Was it impressive?”

“It was rather—when he spoke about the new Member passing through Westminster Hall—past the invisible catafalques of kings—treading on history. It was very moving in that deep voice of his.”

“Go on.”

"He was very good in the contrast between the ecclesiastical architecture—Pugin-Gothic, angels in niches and stained glass—and the unecclesiastical behaviour of Members."

"I hope he gave you some useful advice."

"I don't know. All he said was that brilliant speeches by a new Member are undesirable. 'That merely excites jealousy, my dear Stephen. The only way to advancement is by regular attendance on the Chief Whip and the Party hierarchs.'"

"What cynical advice!" Laura said.

"He also told me," Russell continued, "that if I have any sentiment to spare——"

"Well?"

"I should reserve it for the powerful. It will lead straight to the Garter."

"What a beastly man! Anyhow, you'd look silly with the Garter."

"I have no such ambitions."

"But Parliament attracts you. It does, doesn't it?"

They were now driving through a narrow country lane, and Russell concentrated on the bends in the road.

"It does, doesn't it?" Laura repeated.

"Yes," he answered, "it does."

He drove the car off the road into the grass entrance of a beechwood that rose along the side of a hill, and halted there.

"I don't want to hinder you," Laura said. "I don't want to feel that I'm stopping you from getting on with your work and your career."

"No," said Russell, looking at her steady eyes. "No. Whatever I do, I do because I want to."

"But say—say I interfere with your chances of going into politics."

"That doesn't matter either."

"But are you sure, Stephen?" she asked urgently. "Perhaps now, in this wood—with all those lovely colours——"

They looked at the brazen leaves that made a canopy shot with the blue interstices of sky, and Russell said, "Let's walk, my darling."

They trod the autumn foliage, picking their way past the drying fern.

"While I have you, Laura," he said, "I have no regrets—neither regrets nor remorse."

"Remorse," she echoed.

"Yes, remorse—have you remorse?"

"No, none at all. Is that wicked?"

"I don't know. All I know is that I love you, and that beside that nothing matters at all."

They walked deeper into the wood until the sky was wholly obscured by the tangled branches of the trees. Russell leant back against a beech trunk, and drew Laura towards him.

"I haven't told you," she said, and he kissed her—"very often today"—he kissed her again, "that I love you."

"That," said Russell, "is a very serious omission."

"Let's go on," Laura said. "You know how frightened I get when I'm shut in."

He put his arm around her shoulder, and she put her arm around his waist. Together, they climbed diagonally the wooded hillside that was alternately slippery with roots and flints or soft with pockets of leaves.

"What are you doing tonight?" Russell asked.

"Tonight?" she repeated.

"Yes, tonight," Russell replied morosely. His hand had slackened on her shoulder. "In a moment you'll say, 'what d'you mean, tonight?'"

"No, I won't," Laura said. "Tonight we're going to the Special Air Services Ball—Roger had something to do with them in the war. I don't want to go a bit."

"Oh, you'll enjoy it once you get there," said Russell. "Why shouldn't you?"

"Because I can't," said Laura. "I can't enjoy anything without you. I see the whole world through a piece of muslin since I've known you—everything, my cook, my friends, Peter, Jennifer, the whole lot. How can you say that I'll enjoy myself?"

"Quite easily," Russell said. "You do what you want to do."

"No I do what I have to. And you won't do anything to bring us nearer to each other."

"What sort of thing?"

"What sort of thing?" She hesitated. "Would you take me away with you—and risk what might happen?"

They had reached the edge of the wood, and below them, the fields curving together on the other side of the valley were umbered in the declining light. They stood still for a few moments, breathing deeply with the effort of their climb.

"I think we'd better get back," said Russell. "It's getting late."

"No," said Laura. "You haven't answered me, darling." She took his hands in hers, and faced him. "Will you take me away with you?" she asked again.

"When?" he asked in reply.

"Whenever you like."

"If it were only that, we would have done it long ago. If you were free of responsibility——"

"There's always something—something will always happen to justify doing nothing. For once, I'm going to think of myself—of my own interests. If Roger's lost his licence, he has only himself to blame. . . . Now I've said the words. I can't do any more. For years I've covered up for him——"

"In what way?"

"In a dozen ways—why, my mother left me a small legacy—three thousand pounds—I wanted it for the children. But Roger borrowed it—eight years ago when Nightfreight was doing badly—I lent it to him willingly—he never returned it. It's trivial, I know. I wouldn't have minded for myself——" She was speaking agitatedly, and Russell said "It's not important. We don't need to add up our resentments. If we were to do that, we'd also have to add up our sympathies. You might find you have more of those for Roger"—his voice became slower—"than I'd like you to have."

"No, Stephen—no," she said quickly.

Her irises had become sombre in the evening light, and Russell said, "I feel content—just standing here—far away from everything——"

"Away from everyone. . . . Oh, Stephen, can't we do something about it?"

He hesitated, and then he said, "I'll talk to Harbord—yes I will. I'll talk to Harbord tomorrow."

"Harbord?"

"Yes, Harbord. He's a friend of mine. The best man on divorce in the whole country."

He stirred the dead leaves with his foot, and avoided her eyes.

“Will you?” she asked. “Really?”

“Yes, I will,” he said simply. Then he raised his glance to her face that had become irradiated with joy, and holding her head with his fingers pressed into her hair behind her ears, repeated firmly, “I will—I really will.”

Chapter Thirteen

"**N**O ONE", said Eliarchos, the Anglo-Greek ship-owner whom Metcalfe had invited as an escort for Miss Fretts-Parker, "No one can really describe the tension of life in a pilots' mess—not even a pilot."

The candelabra on the tables seemed to drift with the movement of the dancers, and his voice faded as they turned towards the band still insisting its rhythm through the din of conversation.

"I'm so sorry. . . ." Laura said.

"Not even a pilot," said Eliarchos. "I spent three years in the R.A.F.—but you can't remember it. It's like pleasure. You just can't remember it."

And Laura replied. "I suppose one can remember privately. One can't communicate it."

"That's it," said Eliarchos, "but the tension——"

Laura looked around for Metcalfe, and saw him dancing with Edna Fretts-Parker. She attracted his attention with a wave and a smile. He moved the corner of his mouth in acknowledgement, glanced fleetingly at Eliarchos and was lost in a group of high-voiced women and their escorts who assembled near Brian Wray, the band-leader, were encouraging him with their patronage and applause.

"Just imagine," Eliarchos was saying. "You're in a cockpit with seventy-five odds and bobs—you forget one thing, and you're through."

And if he talks to Harbord, Laura thought, and they could go away, she would tell Roger as soon as it would hurt him least. When the licence affair was over. When Peter and Jennifer were back at school. When he was in one of his arrogant, blustering moods. When he was most successful, and she most remote from him.

"I saw it happen often" said Eliarchos, dancing like a cat. And parenthetically, "I don't know why they don't open some windows. The trouble with these very expensive hotels is that they prefer air-conditioning that doesn't work to natural ventilation that does."

A trickle of sweat was running down the side of his face nearest to Laura, and she averted her check.

"It's all very well for you women," he said, "with your bare shoulders."

His right hand had moved from her waist towards her left shoulder-blade, and she detached herself slightly.

"Where were you stationed in the war?" she asked to make conversation.

He squared his shoulders. "Bush House and Adastral House most of the time—my trouble was I was a businessman and they left me in Accounts."

"Most people would find that an agreeable trouble," said Laura.

A wave of dancers pushed them together, and Laura felt his shirt-button and the stiff piqué of the shirt itself pressed hard against her breast. At the same moment she saw his face laced with sweat and reddened beneath the glistening roots of his thin, dark hair, move in a stale

aroma of martinis and exhausted cigars towards her cheek.

"Shall we sit down" she asked. "It's so hot."

He drew away from her with an angry frown, and his hand fell to her waist. Then, he composed his expression, closing the annoyance in his eyes, and said with a smile, as he guided her back to the table. "Yes—much too hot. So much nicer at the River Club."

The only time that Laura had ever danced with Russell in public had been at the River Club a fortnight earlier; and she said, taking her seat and thanking Eliarchos with a smile as deliberate as his. "Yes, the River Club is delicious. Do you often go there?"

"Hardly ever," said Eliarchos, "but my friends use it—quite a lot."

He had written Laura off, and now turned to Lady Hardington whose husband, a millionaire racehorse owner was in the Argentine. She sat with an aloof and comfortable expression on her face in which the assurance of great wealth mingled with the certainty of her personal beauty. She was looking from the side of her eyes like a sophisticated foal.

"I bought 'Crépuscule' at Sotheby's on Tuesday," Eliarchos said proudly. "Outbid the dealers."

She smiled at him, her eyes absorbed in an irrelevant contemplation of his past.

"Do you collect pictures?" he asked.

"Oh, no," she replied looking straight ahead, "We've *always* had them."

"Lady Hardington's more interested in horses than pictures," said Miss Fretts-Parker sycophantically, remembering that one of Lord Hardington's racehorses had come first the previous day.

"Is that so?" asked Eliarchos.

"Of course," said Lady Hardington. "I adore horses. I've been married to one for nineteen years."

They all thought for a second of Lord Hardington with his long, aristocratic face, his bowler hat and race-glasses; and changed the subject.

"The candles," said Eliarchos, "absorb the smoke, but they make the place hotter."

"Yes," said Lady Hardington.

"I don't know whether I'd rather be stifled or dehydrated. Do you?"

"No."

Lady Hardington drooped her arm over the gilt chair, and looked towards the door. Her hand was white and tapering, and in profile, her face with its thin nose had the elegance of a Saluki dog.

Metcalf returned to the table with Mrs. Fretts-Parker, and Lady Hardington's expression changed into one of interest and greeting.

"Where's Granville?" Metcalf asked her, returning her smile.

The pearl pendant dangling in her corsage sank into the cleft of her breasts as she shrugged her shoulders, and re-emerged.

"The Air Commodore," said Lady Hardington, "has been kidnapped by some old R.A.F. friends, and is now drinking in the Tyrrhenian Bar."

"I'll pull him out," said Metcalf, half-rising.

"Don't do that," said Lady Hardington, detaining him with her hand on his sleeve. "I'm sure he is very happy there. And I am comfortable here."

"How long are you staying?" Mrs. Fretts-Parker called to Madame Feydeau, a Frenchwoman who sat

meekly wearing a Croix de Guerre at the bottom of the table. Mrs. Fretts-Parker was having her usual trouble with her brassière, and was tugging at her dress in order to make it congruent with the cusp.

"Only a day or two," said Madame Feydeau in her slow, deep voice. "My two young children will be home from the country on Thursday."

"I wish I could speak French half as well as you speak English," said Fretts-Parker.

"I had an English nanny," said Madame Feydeau. "In France, we all had English nannies. That's why we drop our aitches."

They all laughed except for Mrs. Fretts-Parker who began to say, "I thought there were no aspirates——" when her husband interrupted her with a scowl and said, "Madame Feydeau isn't really serious."

"Roger," said Madame Feydeau, as if struck by a new thought, "weren't you at the Royal in Castelnau this year?"

"Yes," said Metcalfe, "we both were."

"I thought you were—it came to my mind this morning. I was reading yesterday's *Figaro*. You remember the old woman who owned it?"

"Madame Nodier?" said Laura, and her heart began to beat more quickly as if in the face of danger.

"Yes—yes."

Madame Feydeau took out a cigarette, and the men on each side of her fumbled to light it. In a sympathetic impulse, Laura took out a cigarette from her own handbag and lit it herself. Her fingers were quivering.

"What's Madame Nodier been up to?" she asked flippantly. "Has she decamped with her head-waiter?"

"No, she left him behind," said Madame Feydeau

coolly. "But she decamped all right. She died suddenly—I read it in the Necrology."

"Too bad!" said Metcalfe.

"I don't know what they'll do without her," said Mrs. Fretts-Parker. "She's like that old man with the long beard and the Phoenician cap who used to pose for tourists at Capri. What do you do, Roger, when you lose your man with the beard?"

"You get another."

"No more trips to La Roseaie," said Fretts-Parker. "She must have left a million. . . . Mean as they come!"

"You can't make an awful lot out of that kind of hotel," said Eliarchos, "It's not like the Hilton chain where you take one with another. Now they've built it up horizontally—the chain—and vertically—the subsidiaries——"

"We never went to the island," said Mrs. Fretts-Parker. "I always wanted to go."

"It depends on the link with the tourist agencies," said Fretts-Parker.

"Did you ever go?" his wife asked Laura.

Did I ever go? Laura asked herself. Did I ever go to Castelnau and the island? Was I ever alone with Stephen on the island's pinnacle looking over the empty sea? Did I ever wake in the night with the silence all around except for the stir in the olive-trees and the cry of a night-bird and his voice saying "Laura"?

"What did you say?" she asked. "There's such a noise. I can't hear a word."

"Never mind," said Fretts-Parker, raising his glass. "Skip it!"

And while the conversation, emphatic and assertive passed in front of her, Laura tried in vain to feel regret at

Madame Nodier's death. She had, it seemed to her, been an uncomprehending witness of her relationship with Stephen. She had tried to divert him from it with warnings; she had shown a blackmailing curiosity when they had left for the island.

Laura was wondering serenely if it was wicked to be glad that someone was dead, when the drums of the orchestra rolled, and an announcer called into the microphone, "Ladies and gentlemen—cabaret!"

In the interval between the *adagio* dancers and the American comedian, Metcalfe turned to Laura in the gloom of their table beyond the spotlight, and said, "Are you enjoying yourself?"

She smiled at him, an affectionate, indulgent smile as her gaze travelled to his arm that was lying across the fur stole of Lady Hardington and said, "Yes . . . I can see that you are."

"You're jealous," he said in a whisper, smiling back to her.

"Yes, terribly," she said, still smiling. In some obscure way, the sight of her husband's arm disposed familiarly behind Lady Hardington's back displeased her, and her displeasure affected her doubly because it seemed an act of disloyalty to Russell. And then she decided that it offended her self-respect that Roger should behave with such casual intimacy towards another woman in her presence. With her jealousy thus rationalised into a decorous motive, she tried to think hostilely of her husband. But the hostile emotion would not come. "I can never be happy with my lover unless I'm on good terms with my husband," someone had said in a play she had seen at the Haymarket. It had seemed absurd when she had listened to the lines on the stage. But now the words seemed plausible.

"Jolly good!" said Metcalfe, and brayed with laughter in unison with Fretts-Parker as a show-girl with a sandwich-board walked across the floor, a background to the compère's announcement. And in that moment, the spasm of jealousy disappeared like a pain relieved by a miraculous drug. Laura studied her husband's glistening laughing face in profile, illuminated for a few seconds by the match with which he lit a cigarette for Lady Hardington.

"Nothing," Laura said to herself. "Nothing, nothing, nothing."

"How did you get on with Eliarchos?" Metcalfe asked, turning back to her.

"I dislike him," she said.

"He's all right."

"Well—I don't like him."

"Sha!! I hit him?" he said, smiling amiably. "I feel like a scene."

"Don't be silly," Laura said hastily. "And, I think, darling, you've had enough whisky."

The smile faded from his face, and he said in a vicious tone, "When I want your advice, Laura, I'll ask you for it."

"Sh—sh—sh!" came the admonition from a nearby table. The American comedian standing as still as a wax-work except for his gyrating mouth, nose and eyebrows, was already in full delivery.

"... and there at her graveside was the family friend—the deceased lady's boy friend—weeping his eyes out."

The laughter welled up nervously from the tables around.

"'Don't cry, old chap,' said the husband consoling him."

The laughter grew louder.

" 'Don't cry, old chap,' said the husband. '*I'll marry again!*' "

There was a second's hesitation, and the laughter grew tumultuous, rising a second time as the point of the anecdote became clear.

"Very funny," said Fretts-Parker, wiping the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand. Madame Feydeau and Mrs. Fretts-Parker looked hurriedly at each other, and hurriedly looked away.

"The *cocu's* revenge," said Eliarchos, "is to know what it's all about and not give a damn."

"Did you see his film—'Mogador'?" Laura asked Madame Feydeau.

"I saw it in Paris—very poor! The American's dream of Morocco is a perpetual unveiling of Fatimas."

"To Mogador," said Metcalfe, "used to be a verb when I was in the R.A.F."

"Sounds frightfully rude," said Mrs. Fretts-Parker, giggling.

"Not a bit," said Metcalfe, squirting soda from a syphon in a hissing accompaniment to the song the comedian had begun. "To Mogador meant to confuse, to make a mix-up-of. There was a telephone exchange in Algiers called Mogador—you could never get it."

"Sh—sh—sh!" came a command from the next table.

"Waiter!" Metcalfe called loudly, ignoring the shushing. "Waiter!"

The waiter came, and whispered in Metcalfe's ear that he was not allowed to take orders for drinks during the cabaret.

"Absurd!" said Metcalfe.

"Quite absurd," said Madame Feydeau, encouraging

him. "I've lived long enough with the British to say——"

"Oh, do be quiet," a voice said from the darkness.

"——to say that you're too docile."

". . . She was my lay-girl,
My night-and-day girl,
My never-say-nay girl . . ."

the American sang, and at the cadences the piano played melancholy chords.

"Can't understand," said Metcalfe to Eliarchos, "how we can allow the Government to waste dollars on this stuff."

Eliarchos smiled to himself, and then at Laura, who with her face propped in her hands, was trying to compensate by her attention for her husband's hostile commentary.

"Well, why do we?" Metcalfe insisted, unwilling to be diverted.

"Nothing to do with me," said Eliarchos, "I'm only a shipowner. I do as I'm told by the Chancellor!"

Metcalfe mumbled something to himself; but the singer had already finished his song and was retreating with a distribution of bows through the door behind the orchestra.

"Did you hear someone say 'Do be quiet!' from over there?" Metcalfe asked Laura.

"No, I did not," she replied.

"I did," said Lady Hardington. "That dreary looking gentleman with the glasses."

The orchestra had begun to play a waltz, and the floor was filling up with dancers.

"Let's dance, darling," said Laura.

"No, thank you," said Metcalfe. "I'm very comfortable—very."

He stretched his leg on to a chair at the next table barring the aisle to the table beyond it. He turned his head, and stared at the four people who were sitting there, two of them elderly, a fair-haired young girl in a tulle dress who seemed related to them and a tall man in glasses.

"D'you know that kangaroo?" Metcalfe asked Eliarchos lazily as he was rising to dance with Mrs. Fretts-Parker.

"That's Alce Purves," said Eliarchos. "You know—designed that vertical take-off job. She's his fiancée."

"That's the trouble with these theoretical chaps," said Metcalfe. "No manners. Someone ought to teach them some. There ought to be special lectures—like in the R.A.F.—officers' deportment—boffins' deportment. . . ."

"Come on, Roger" said Laura. "I adore this tune. Do let's dance."

"No, thank you," said Metcalfe.

His gaze didn't leave the nearby table for a moment; he was watching it with the intentness of an animal that refuses to be distracted from its approaching feed.

Purves rose, and the girl smiled to him affectionately as he preceded her to remove the chairs that lay between them and the dance-floor.

When he came to the table where Metcalfe sprawled with his leg across the aisle, Purves said, "Excuse me."

Metcalfe didn't answer. He stared straight ahead of him; and the others who with the exception of Laura were drinking and chatting to each other, ignored them.

"Excuse me," said Purves in a louder voice.

Metcalfe continued to stare gloomily ahead as if

everything around—music, dancers and Purves himself—had no existence at all. Purves' fiancée had now caught up with him, and was smiling. She thought Metcalfe's self-absorption in the middle of the ballroom's tumult rather funny.

Purves straightened himself, and touched Metcalfe on the shoulder.

"Excuse me," he said, his voice so loud that the conversation at the table stopped. "Excuse me—I want to dance."

Metcalfe slowly lowered his leg from the chair, and with great deliberation rose to his feet.

"Did you say you want to dance?" he asked Purves in a toneless voice.

"Yes," said Purves. He had begun to smile; he had asserted himself in front of his fiancée.

"O.K." said Metcalfe. "Let's dance!"

And in a flash, he seized Purves in a dancing posture, and began to waltz him, struggling, on to the floor.

"No," said Laura, her face white. "No, Roger."

Lady Hardington began to laugh, but her laugh turned to a stifled scream as the two men in their grotesque waltz crashed against the table, knocking over an ice-pail with an upturned bottle. The dancers surged away from the enlaced pair, Metcalfe cold and excited and Purves panting and sobbing with the effort to disengage himself from his humiliating partner. The band that had gone on playing for almost a minute stopped as the laughter of the onlookers changed into cries of protest. Metcalfe and Purves fell against another table, knocking a cup of coffee over a woman's evening dress.

"That's enough, Metcalfe," Eliarchos called out.

Purves' glasses had fallen off during the first pivot and had been trodden on. They lay in the middle of the floor,

sinister as a single shoe in the middle of the road after a motor accident.

"Stop it!" said Fretts-Parker, taking Metcalfe's arm and dragging him away from Purves.

For a few moments, a group of guests surrounded Metcalfe, expostulating.

"He asked for it," he replied, adjusting his tie and repinning his decorations which had become loose. "He asked for it—" and to one persistent critic with a fair moustache, he added, "and you're asking for it too!"

Close by in the centre of another questioning group, Purves was standing in angry bewilderment. Without his glasses, he could hardly see, and his collar had become detached from his shirt.

"Why didn't you hit him?" his fiancée kept asking as a rhetorical obligato to the solicitude of his friends.

The band began to play again, and Fretts-Parker edged Metcalfe towards the exit.

"May I take you to the door?" Eliarchos asked Laura who had watched the scene immobile with shame and horror.

"No, thank you," she said, her head lowered. "I'll be all right."

Mrs. Fretts-Parker was making an energetic diversion. "Have you seen 'The Woman of Pisa' Laura?" she asked.

"Dismal," said Eliarchos lighting a cigarette, and looking over his shoulder towards the door to make sure that Fretts-Parker had effectively disposed of Metcalfe.

"Dismal," he repeated. "I saw it last night. Nihilistic—I hate people with a destructive outlook."

"I hate them too," said Mrs. Fretts-Parker. "I hate people who live by negatives—anarchists, existentialists most of all."

"But you don't like governments either—you said so at dinner. What's left, Madame Feydeau?" said Eliarchos.

"The orderly individual," she answered as she rose with a smile and drew her stole around her shoulders. "The orderly individual who makes rational social decisions—such as deciding when the party's over and its time to go home. . . . Don't move . . . I'll find him in the bar myself."

"And what about you?" Fretts-Parker to Laura. "Are you sure you wouldn't like me to see you home? I've got my car outside."

"You see," said Lady Hardington to Mrs. Fretts-Parker—she had recovered her composure and was smiling to Eliarchos out of earshot on the other side of the table— "I said to Eliarchos I thought he was a very good dancer. And he said, 'Naturally! I once earned my living as a dancing partner.' Not many people would admit they had been gigolos!"

"What did you say?" Mrs. Fretts-Parker asked, her eyes beady.

"What could I say?" said Lady Hardington. "All I could say was 'Congrats!'"

"My dear fellow," someone said in a clear voice from a neighbouring table, "there's nothing to be surprised about. It's vintage Metcalfe. You know what he's like. . . ."

"Perhaps," said Laura to Fretts-Parker, "perhaps you'd just get me a taxi."

Chapter Fourteen

SHE lay with her eyes closed, affecting sleep, while Metcalfe performed his fetichistic ritual of preparing for bed—the curtains half-drawn, the right-hand window opened wide, the clock re-wound, his trousers folded as he had been taught at Cranwell and his keys and loose change tidily disposed at the bedside.

“D’you want the light off?” he asked. It was the first time he had spoken to Laura since they had returned in a taxi from the ball—Fretts-Parker had taken the key of his car—and she made no reply.

She felt the bed sag and creak as he climbed in and switched off the reading-light above them. Immediately, she opened her eyes, lying still and staring into the darkness. He touched her hand, and she drew away.

“Oh, don’t be so damn’ silly,” Metcalfe said. “He——”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Laura replied. She turned her back to him, tense, her jaws tightly shut, her fingers clenched on the sheet.

She could hear his wakeful breathing and in her ear against the pillow her own heart-beat, distinct and exaggerated; she closed her eyes and shut inside them the image of Russell and the procession of days moving

backwards through time till the evening at Castelnau les Fleurs when she had first spoken to him. There were places beyond her husband's reach, however closely he lay to her; they were the parts of her mind where he could never enter. She pressed her face against her left arm, and summoned her recollections, to take them with her into sleep.

After about twenty minutes, she heard in a drowse her husband get up, stumble about the room in the darkness and light a cigarette. She could see him in silhouette, sitting by the window smoking.

She lay still and unfrightened in a pit with Russell at her side, and far above was a patch of clear blue sky, and around the edge of the pit were people with familiar voices—her son and her husband among them.

When she awoke, she was sweating, and she wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. The luminous hands of her travelling clock said twenty-past two, but when she turned in the bed, she felt a sense of emptiness and a stir of fear.

"Roger!" she called out in a conversational voice though with an ascending note.

She imagined that he might have fallen asleep in the chair which now that the moon had sunk, was invisible.

There was no reply, and she switched on the light. The room was empty.

Putting on her dressing-gown, she hurried into the corridor where the lights were still burning, towards Metcalfe's study. He was accustomed, she knew, to work late, drafting memoranda, planning routes and making notes for correspondence.

"Roger!" she called. "Roger!"

The door was open, and the desk-lamp threw its downward light over the table and the floor which was littered with discarded magazines and circulars. Metcalfe was normally punctilious in his tidiness; he made it a rule never to leave any papers exposed on his desk when he finished his work. Everything to be filed was carefully docketed, and laid in his filing-basket. Even his waste-paper basket usually had an orderly appearance as if the journals and printed letters had been carefully sorted before their rejection.

But now the floor, strewn with paper, had an angry look; and the overturned calendar on the table, holding down a single letter that flapped in the draught between the window and open door, gave the room a sluttish and unfamiliar air. Instinctively, Laura went to raise the calendar, and as she did so, she saw the letter was from the Minister of Civil Aviation to Wakelin.

" . . . under Paragraph 10 of Article 23 of the Air Navigation Order, 1954 . . . not a fit and proper person . . . inexpedient in the public interest that the licence be renewed."

She was still half-asleep, but the phrases stood out from the letter, italicising their significance to her through the scribbling of her own anaesthesia. Her eyes couldn't focus on the words, and she gave up trying to read. Obscurely,

she felt that something indeterminate and terrible was about to happen, and she stumbled back into the corridor towards Peter's room, calling his name as she went. She remembered the unfinished conditionals with which her husband had referred to the possibility of the Minister finally refusing to restore his licence. "If that little bastard Bewsher——" And then the fingers dug into palms, the ominous stare into the middle distance, the uncompleted threat.

"Peter!" she called in a voice that was strange to herself. Her breath croaked in her trachea. "Peter!" she tried to call again, but there was no sound. His bedroom door was open, and the bed that he had clearly slept in was empty.

"They've gone to Calthorpe, madam," said the butler who stood in his bare feet and a dressing-gown behind her. Without his false teeth, he seemed old and undignified, and Laura retreated from him with a movement of distaste.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Mr. Metcalfe said he had a job to do. I heard he was awake, and he said he and Mr. Peter were going to Calthorpe."

"What else?"

"He said he was going to show 'em."

"But he must have said something else."

"I don't know, madam. . . . It's all I know. It's no use getting annoyed with me. . . . If you can do better with another butler . . ."

"Never mind," said Laura. "I'm not annoyed, Wilson. I'm worried. That's all there is to it. I'm worried."

The butler was already shambling down the corridor, talking to himself. "Well, if you can do better with

another butler. . . . You know what Mr. Metcalfe's like . . . the last time it happened he pressed me to stay. . . ."

Laura ran back to the bedroom, and dialled Russell's number. He answered immediately.

"Stephen?"

"Hello, Laura. . . . What is it?"

"Why aren't you asleep?"

"I've been working . . . and I've been lying awake in the dark thinking of you I like it."

"Stephen . . ."

"Yes? Is anything wrong? You sound peculiar."

"It's Roger."

"What about him?"

"He's gone off to Calthorpe."

"Well?"

"He's taken Peter with him. He told the butler he's—he's going to show them, or something of that sort."

She had hoped that Russell would reassure her. Everything that she had affirmed contained within it a doubt. But when he spoke again, his voice had become urgent and probing.

"What exactly did he say?"

"What I told you—it's all I know."

"Did he say, for example, that he was going to fly?"

"Fly? Fly?"

Her fear had become a panic as he spoke the word: in its association with Peter and her husband, it had always been evocative of disaster.

"You mean," she said to tame her alarm, "go on the night flight—or something."

"No," Russell said sharply. "Did he say anything about taking up a plane himself?"

"No," said Laura. "No. Of course not. He wouldn't do such a thing. Oh, Stephen, how can you put a thought like that——"

"Because he's been saying it for the last three days at the Royal Aero Club. . . . He's been saying he'll take up a plane, and show them—meaning the Ministry—what sort of pilot he is Are you still there. Laura?"

"Yes."

There was a second's silence, and Laura said. "Stephen, I feel so desperate—I'm so terrified. Tell me what to do."

"You must know the airport manager."

"Yes."

"Telephone him—tell him as tactfully as you can not to let your husband fly—not in any circumstances."

"Yes, I will."

The oppressive anguish had begun to lift at the prospect of action.

"And then--no, ring me back if there's any difficulty. How far is Calthorpe by car—at night?"

"Only about an hour. Why?"

"Just curiosity. Ring me anyhow. Will you, darling?"

"Of course. Do you?"

"Very much more than I can tell you—and especially at this moment."

Ten minutes later, she telephoned him again.

"Stephen," she called. "Stephen."

She was sobbing, and her hand was shaking as she held the receiver.

"What's the matter?" he asked in alarm.

"He's—he's taken an aeroplane up—just before I rang—and Peter . . . he's taken Peter too. . . ."

She began to sob again, and Russell said, "Don't be silly. Pull yourself together. Please don't be silly, darling. He's a brilliant pilot. They'll have a very good time. Listen, Laura. I'll be over in—let me see—under a quarter of an hour. I'll drive you down to Calthorpe."

"Will you—will you really, Stephen?"

"Yes."

Her weeping ceased, and briefly her anxiety disappeared in a blinding hope.

"And will you stay with me till Peter's safely down?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"I'll still stay with you—if you want me to."

"Yes, my darling, I want you to."

She heard him put the receiver down, and then, wiping her eyes with a corner of the sheet, decided that she would wear her blue suit. It had just been pressed, and was fresher than the grey tweed which she had worn during the day.

And then she looked at the sky with its drifting clouds and thought of Peter; and when she switched off the bedroom light after she had dressed, the terrors of night returned.

Chapter Fifteen

“To the left!” said Laura, and Russell turned from the arterial road towards the glow of light that rose above the black contour of the hill. He had driven very fast, and only one automatic signal, fixed futilely at red in an empty suburban street, had interrupted their progress.

“Ten past four,” he said, looking at his wrist-watch below the dashboard.

“The landing-lights are on,” said Laura.

“What about it?” said Russell, deprecating her anxiety.

She didn’t speak again till they drew up at the entrance to the airport. A uniformed gatekeeper stood in the middle of the road near a row of parked cars, and said to Russell, “Sorry, sir. No one’s allowed on yet. Pull up alongside——”

Russell saw that apart from two or three men who stood with dissatisfied expressions, smoking, in the roadway under the light drizzle, the cars contained passengers waiting with the apathetic resignation of those who have to queue for an indeterminate time.

“It’s all right, Ferris,” Laura said, leaning across Russell. “You’d better open the gate.”

He peered in, and said. "There's no one allowed in, Madam——"

"I'll take responsibility for that," said Laura. "Please hurry!"

The gatekeeper opened the wire-barrier reluctantly, and Russell put the car into gear.

"Who the hell do they think they are?" one of the men in the roadway called out in a general complaint.

The central building itself, dominating the main runway, was lit in every window, but the approaches were in darkness; and Russell drove slowly past the car-park, the multiple signpost pointing to the capitals of the world and the hangar with its silhouette of a Bristol Avon, black as a drawing in a spotters' manual, against the airfield's illumination.

A policeman waved the car to a standstill, and asked, "Yes, sir?"

"This is Mrs. Metcalfe," said Russell, getting out of the car. The air was clear and sweet-smelling from the hay-fields all around, and Russell breathed deeply, his perceptions suddenly sharp and alert. He felt an excitement provoked by the kind of challenge that had stimulated him throughout his life, rousing him from indifference and changing rebuffs into triumph. He was confident and determined, and said to the policeman while Laura waited, "Any news?"

"He's still up."

"Are they alarmed?"

"They've been talking to him."

"What's he been doing?"

"Circling—round and round—he's been doing it for nearly an hour—he's got a Rapide. Listen. . . ."

Russell listened, and heard a night-bird squawk a fading note, then behind it the faint grumble of a distant aeroplane.

"All we need now," said the policeman, "is an air-raid siren."

"What is it, Stephen?" Laura called. Russell returned to the car, his shoes crunching on the stone.

"Nothing," he said. "I think you'd better get out, darling. We'll go up to the Tower."

"Nice night, Mrs. Metcalfe," said the policeman, saluting.

"Very," she said. Her legs were trembling, and she took Russell's arm. "Is there any news?"

"They'll tell you inside, ma'am," said the policeman. "If you ask me, they're just having a bit of fun."

Russell laughed. "Well," he said, "it'll be something for the papers. . . . Did they get you out of bed?"

"Yes," said the policeman, "and you should have heard the wife!"

"There you are," said Russell to Laura, "you're not the only one," and she smiled wanly as they went past the brilliantly lit but empty waiting-room through the door leading to the offices and the Control Tower.

At the top of the stairs in the ante-room where the tape-recorders were clicking, Gregory, the airport manager, was standing talking to the engineers. He broke off his conversation when Laura appeared, and greeted her.

She didn't reply, but looked at him, her eyes staring, waiting for reassurance.

"It's all right, Mrs. Metcalfe," he said, putting his hand

on her arm. He had a deep voice and a comforting manner, and Russell's gaze travelled to his brown hand as it lay on Laura's sleeve. "Everything's O.K. There's nothing to worry about."

She took off her small felt hat and shook out her hair. "And Peter?" she asked.

"He's fine too," said the manager. "We've said 'hello' to him a few times."

"When—when's Roger coming down?"

Gregory looked quickly from the engineers to Russell, and then at the ground.

"He says he wants to talk to the Minister."

"I don't understand."

"Well," said Gregory, straightening himself and looking Laura in the face, "I'd better tell you frankly, Mrs. Metcalfe, we're having trouble. . . . Yes, please sit down. . . ."

A young engineer had brought her a chair.

"He says he's going to show the Ministry whether he's fit to have a licence—and that unless——"

"Unless what——?"

"I don't know," Gregory finished lamely. "I think you'd better come into the Tower."

Two radio officers were sitting at the horse-shoe control panel. The traffic manager, a man of about thirty-eight in a R.A.F.V.R. tie, was standing behind them with a police-inspector while another official in a dark suit was peering through the wide glass windows at the sky and the runway.

"Hello, BGA-3, hello, BGA-3," a controller was calling at intervals.

Russell drew the traffic manager aside, and said "What's the position?"

"Well, sir," he replied, "he's been circling, but in the last ten minutes, he's made two rather nasty low runs over the Tower."

"Is there any danger?"

The young man hesitated. Then he said, "Yes, there is. There's always danger—great danger—when you have an aircraft that refuses to come under the orders of the Tower. Besides, we're expecting the 16.00 'plane in. . . . And there are two over there waiting to go." He pointed to two Bristol Superfreighters drawn up on the tarmac with the car-ramps extending below their noses like tongues.

"The police won't let them on," said the traffic manager with a wave towards the door and the passengers whom he seemed, frowning, to visualise in a queue of thousands outside.

They stopped talking as the controller took up his telephone, and gave instructions to aircraft to stay clear of the airport.

"Hello, BGA-3, hello BGA-3," he went on a few moments later.

A voice crackled through the filigree of the loud-speaker panel. "Hello, Calthorpe—hello, Calthorpe—any news yet from Bewsher? We're having a whale of a time." And then it began to sing "Up she goes . . ."

It was Metcalfe's voice, sounding like a gramophone record played at an excessively high speed, shrill and unnatural.

"It's Roger," said Laura, standing. "It's Roger."

"Have a word with him," said Gregory. "Just normal like."

She took the instrument, and said, "Roger . . ."

There was no reply, but they could hear the steady turning of the aircraft's engine.

"Roger," she said again, "it's Laura."

After a pause, they heard his mocking reply, "It's Laura!—Good-morning, Laura—we trust you are well."

She listened for him to continue, and then she said, "Roger—do please come down——"

"Oh, no! Not just yet. . . . Welcome to the exhibition!"

The last words were almost lost in a confusion of atmospherics as simultaneously they heard the aircraft dive, flatten across the airfield and climb with a singing whine. Instinctively, Russell and the inspector and the man in the dark suit had cowered.

"Close!" said the inspector nonchalantly. His face flushed.

"What about the ambulance—fire-engines?" Russell asked Gregory.

The airport manager looked at him impatiently, and said, "Much obliged. It's routine."

"And the Ministry?"

"We told them at once. We mightn't have done so—but there are politics in this. That's the trouble with flying nowadays. Too much politics. If it hadn't been for politics, this mightn't have happened. Right, Geoff?"

The traffic manager took a tray with tea which had just been brought up by a clerk, and said, "Right, Bill. . . . Like a cup of tea, Mrs. Metcalfe?"

She took a cup and put it on the table where she let it get cold. They waited in silence for the aeroplane to return.

"It's a bad show for the company," Gregory said to Russell, drawing him aside. "Here we are—doing our job—we've been pushing them out in thousands on the cheap night-runs for the last four months—heaviest traffic ever—

one every three minutes—cars, freight, everything despite the publicity—and then”—he shrugged his shoulders—“all this.”

“I imagine,” said Russell, diffidently now, “I imagine you’ve told the other directors.”

“Akers is in Majorca—Group Captain Welling is in Scotland—and the rest—we never see them—they turn up to the Annual Meeting. . . .”

Gregory laughed to himself, and splayed his wide fingers over the waistband of his trousers. “Mind you,” he said, “we had an ex-director down here earlier on tonight—old Huberton.”

“Good Lord!” said Russell.

“You know him, I suppose?”

“Yes, quite well. I read what he said about Nightfreight too, when his resignation was announced.”

“Well!” said Gregory slowly, “well . . . there’s a class of man who has to be judged by his own set of standards. I said to Huberton when he turned up with his old Rolls—I said, ‘Glad to see you bear us no grudge’—I was being funny. . . . And he said, ‘No, my dear fellow, a gentleman never bears grudges when they interfere with his convenience.’ What can you do with a man like that?”

“Just accept him,” said Russell. “Where was he off to?”

“Calais—he was going south.”

Laura came up to them. “Does Mr. Bewsher know—about this?” she asked.

“I telephoned the Ministry,” said Gregory. “They said they’d let Bewsher know—I spoke to the Duty Officer, and he told the police. That’s all there is to it.”

“I remember,” said the traffic manager, stirring his tea with a pencil, “when I was in the R.A.F., I had a pupil—

he took up a 'plane—his first night solo—and then he lost his nerve and wouldn't come down."

"What happened?" Russell asked. He could see Laura's tense eyes fixed on the speaker, waiting for the story's ending.

"We talked to him," said Geoff. "Just kept talking to him. Soothed him. We said to him 'Look here, old chap. There's two ways of coming down, and one of them's safe. Now you remember what we taught you and do it.' He came down all right—after about twenty minutes."

"Depends on the type," said Gregory.

"Hello, BGA-3, hello, BGA-3," said the controller.

"Depends on the type," Gregory repeated. "I remember a chap—before the war—he took up a 'plane and said he was going to commit suicide."

Russell saw the panic start in Laura's eyes, and tried to divert Gregory from his theme. "What happened to all those civil pilots," he asked, "when war broke out?"

"He got his 'plane up," said the airport manager undisturbed, "and the more we told him to come down, the more aggressive he became."

"What happened?" Laura asked. "What happened?"

"Well," said Gregory, "we came to the conclusion—we all knew him—fellow by the name of Cogley—we came to the conclusion he was a show-off—shooting a big line—and that the more attention we gave him, the more he'd do it."

"That's right," said Geoff.

"And——?" asked Russell.

"Well, we just ignored him. And he came down safe—watch out!"

He put his hand on Laura's head, as the sound of an

aircraft that seemed about to enter the Tower rattled the windows with a savage reverberation.

"BGA-3, hello, BGA-3!" Gregory took the receiver from the controller, and called to Metcalfe, his hand making sweat marks around the instrument.

"Listen, Roger," he said. "Roger!"

Through the loudspeaker came Metcalfe's voice, languidly. "Roger yourself! What is it now, old chap? . . . Like that tight turn?"

"Come on, Roger," said Gregory in a wheedling tone. "You've shown 'em you can do it. . . . Let's call it a day."

A crackle. Then, "No old chap. We're all right for another hour or two, and we're going to demonstrate a few night—what did Ainsworth call them?—evolutions!"

"Don't be silly, old boy," said Gregory, his face darkening in colour. "Your wife—you're upsetting her."

"Who brought her?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"Can I have a word with him?" Russell asked.

"No," said Laura, interposing herself. "I don't want you to."

The staff around them were looking curiously at Laura as she took Russell's arm.

"Let me talk to him again," said Laura. Her face was white with anxiety, her eyes pouched with sleeplessness.

"Roger," she said. "Roger. . . . Please come down. You know how bad sudden changes of height are for Peter. . . ."

"Peter's fine," came the curt reply. "How are you Peter?"

"Fine," came another voice, lighter and younger, as if speaking from a great distance.

"Peter?" Laura said. "Why—what made you—you're worrying me terribly."

She was clutching the telephone as if she was holding on to her son himself.

"Sorry, darling," came Peter's voice, distorted by the receiver, "We just had to do it. Don't you see? It's a demonstration."

"You've demonstrated enough for one evening. Why not come down now?"

In the Control Room they could hear a mumble of talk in the aircraft, and they waited for Peter's answer.

"Daddy says 'not yet'," said Peter.

"We're going to show the flag at London Airport, Northolt—and God knows where," said Metcalfe, "for at least half an hour. . . . We'll then call back—but before we go, ladies and gentleman, you will see a Falling Leaf. Are you ready, Peter?"

His voice faded, and a few seconds later they heard the downward, spiralling sound of an aircraft in a rolling dive.

"He's a bit round the bend," said Geoff in a confidential voice to Russell. "Always was a bit, you know."

Russell put his hands in his pockets to keep them still as the moan of the aeroplane rose in pitch.

"I was in his squadron, you know," said Geoff. "Nice fellow. . . . Got the D.F.C., you know."

The aeroplane flattened out with a sigh, and a din of conversation started up as a group of journalists who had arrived from London began to question Gregory.

"But half-way through his second tour he began to go to pieces," said Geoff. "His crew wouldn't fly with him . . . complained to the C.O."

"Why?" asked Russell who till that moment had been

abstractedly watching Laura as she sat with her face in her hands.

"Too dicey," said Geoff. "Smashed up more of our own kites than theirs. Nice fellow, all the same."

"Laura!" Russell called.

They walked together through the press of officials and visitors who cluttered the Control Room, to the stairs.

"BGA-3, hello, BGA-3."

The controller's steady voice followed them to the exit.

In the darkness beyond the rim of the airport's lights, they walked with their arms clasped around each other, their steps cautious, till they reached the fence by the trees. The night had become cold and the grass had a rime of frost.

"Let's stay here," said Laura. "I can't stand the Tower any more."

"All right," said Russell.

"It's proof," she said. "It's proof, isn't it? If he'd gone alone—I could have understood. But to take Peter! It's such a wicked, wicked, thing to do. He knew. . . . It was the thing that would hurt me most. He knew it."

"Why should he want to hurt you?"

"Because I no longer had anything to give him—and I can't blame him for that. But it's so disproportionate. . . ."

She began to cry. "I'm frightened, Stephen. . . . Perhaps it's a punishment—perhaps I deserve it because I've been wicked myself."

"Oh, rubbish!"

She looked up eagerly. "It is rubbish, isn't it?"

He could see her face in the first glimpses of light on the horizon.

"Whatever I've done," she said agitatedly, "It's only been because I love you—for no other reason. It's cruel and wicked of him to take Peter. I'll never forgive him—never, never, never."

Sobbing, she rested her forehead against his chest, and said "I'll look such a mess when we go back."

He kissed her damp, swollen cheeks and the side of her nose. "I want to ask you something, Laura," he said. "It's very serious."

"Yes—what is it?"

"When you said you'll never forgive your husband, what did you mean?"

"I meant—that after tonight—whatever happens—after the shame and anguish—and fear—that he's deliberately caused me—nothing between us—nothing can ever be as it was."

"As it was?"

"Even as it was since I've known you. To take someone's child as a hostage—as a means of blackmail—it's unspeakably wicked. . . ."

"Will you go back to him—when he comes down?"

"No—no, I won't—never!"

"Are you certain?"

"Quite certain—absolutely certain!"

"Will you come away with me tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Today—when the night is over."

He could hear her quickened breathing, and sense her face turning up towards his.

"Yes . . ." he went on. "I've thought it all out. If we

leave by train and sea for France—I've a big job to do in New York for Amlebcó—the oil company—we could fly from Orly—it would distract them if we went from there—I could arrange everything in Paris—visas, everything!"

"But, darling—Hoyland and the Recordership?"

"The Recordership is worth exactly two hundred a year—and I dislike irregular hours."

He could feel her strong fingers pressing through his jacket into the flesh of his forearms.

"But are you sure—are you sure? . . . Say you gave all that up, and then hated me for making you do it?"

"I would never hate you," he said simply. "I love you."

A pale grey light had dimmed the illuminations of the airfield, and Russell looked at Laura's face, shadowed and thin.

"Are you sure you want to?" she said again.

"Certain," he answered. "I'll get two tickets on the eleven o'clock train. It's quieter. . . . And I'll arrange the currency. I'll be there at a quarter to. At Victoria. Now don't do anything silly like going to Waterloo."

She smiled as if to herself, and then she said, "Shall I tell him?"

"No—nothing at all. We'll write to him from New York. . . . After all, he left you, not you him. . . . You didn't bolt your door after he left the house?"

"No."

"Good."

"Why?"

"Nothing—a legal quibble."

"Peter's going back to school tomorrow," she said reflectively. "He's all packed."

He kissed her excitedly, and she said, "Oh, darling—

if only Peter were on the ground and safe, I believe there, never, never, never would have been a happier woman—not in the whole world!”

In the Control Tower, they were sitting silently grouped around the panel.

“Well?” Russell asked as he entered.

“He’s been talking to us,” said Gregory, “but we’re not answering.”

“Why not?” Russell asked.

“I know Mr. Metcalfe pretty well,” Gregory answered. “If there’s no reply, he’ll want to come down and find out why not. Besides, I imagine Peter’s asleep, and it’s pretty lonely up there at night.”

They could hear the muttering of an aircraft, and then a voice through the loudspeaker. It was tired and dejected.

“Hello, Calthorpe—why the hell don’t you answer? Are you all dead, you rotten bastards?”

The journalists giggled.

“How about saying ‘good-morning’?” Metcalfe asked. He seemed to be struggling to get the words out.

“Please speak to him,” Laura whispered to Gregory.

“No,” he said emphatically. “He’s getting tired. You can hear it. . . . Geoff, give Mrs. Metcalfe a cup of tea.”

“Yes,” the inspector was saying to the journalists. “It’s pretty serious—not only without a licence but, in my opinion—this isn’t for quotation—endangering life as well.”

“Aren’t you Mr. Russell?” one of the journalists enquired.

"I am," said Russell.

"Are you here in a professional capacity, sir?"

"No," said Russell, "I am merely a friend." Then to Gregory, "Are you sure you oughtn't to speak to him?"

"Not yet," said Gregory. He stared out of the window at the pearl-white sky, and said, "There he is—north-east."

Russell strained his eyes, but he could see nothing.

"He's flying along the horizon," said Gregory, "above that cloud—to the left of it."

"Hello, Calthorpe, hello, Calthorpe!" It was Metcalfe again. He sounded dispirited, and he pronounced each syllable slowly and artificially. "I'm coming in now—coming in."

Gregory depressed the switch, and said into the telephone, "BGA-3, come in. Good-morning, Roger! What would you like for breakfast—tea or coffee? And how d'you like your bacon?"

"No breakfast, Bill! Miss Wallis gave me some poisoned sandwiches before we went up. . . . Coming in, now, Bill—coming in."

His voice died away, and everyone, except for the engineers at the controls, rose to their feet. They could see the aeroplane, approaching from the north-east, losing height steadily and preparing for the touch-down.

Gregory stood with his arms folded, a relieved smile on his face.

"I knew it," he said. "I knew it. Just leave 'em alone."

He turned to Laura, and said "You've had a bad night, Mrs. Metcalfe."

"It's all right now," said Laura. She had powdered her face, and looked serene and composed. "Everything's all right."

The machine bumped once, rose in the air, then bumped again till the nose pointed upward and the aeroplane rolled steadily and securely along the runway.

"One moment, please," the inspector said severely to the journalists who had begun to scramble towards the door. They formed an impatient cortège behind him.

"Coming down, Mrs. Metcalfe?" Gregory enquired.

"Yes," she said. "I'll follow you."

Through the window, she could see Peter climbing wearily from the aeroplane, but her husband remained in his seat with his head lowered.

"At a quarter to eleven," she said firmly to Russell.

"Are you quite sure?" he asked her.

"Yes," she replied. "Quite sure. . . . Go back now. I'll come on by train—perhaps with Peter—or I'll get a lift."

"Let me wait," he said.

"No, don't wait," she said. "This is my part of the trouble. Yours"—she smiled to him tenderly and uncertainly—"yours is for later."

"That's all right," he said.

"Good-bye, Stephen."

"Good-bye, Laura."

He clasped her hand, and she turned away as Gregory called her name.

"Hello, mother," said Peter as she came up to the aircraft. He was standing by the fuselage, white-faced and fatigued, eyeing with amazement the group that was following Laura. "What's all the fuss about?"

"Never mind now," said Laura. She kissed his cheek,

and added, "I'm so glad to see you—but I wish you hadn't done it. Why did you, darling?"

"Had to keep an eye on the old man," said Peter smiling. A trace of vomit lay on his lapel.

Laura looked bitterly towards the cockpit where the inspector from the ground was already questioning Metcalfe who answered in sleepy grunts.

"Come and have breakfast," said Laura.

"Yes, please," said Peter, putting his arm around her waist. "I'm hungry now. Bangers!"

They had walked a few paces away from the aeroplane when Peter said, "I'd better see . . ."

"What's the matter?"

"I want to see how dad is," said Peter in a troubled voice. "He was feeling pretty rotten just before we landed."

"Too much whisky and bad temper," Laura said contemptuously.

But Peter had already turned back to the group of men, some of them shivering in the cold morning air, who were helping Metcalfe out of the aircraft.

Chapter Sixteen

AFTER the rainy night, the day glowed with a steady autumnal sunshine, warm and benevolent; and by the time Russell had collected the tickets from Cook's in Berkeley Street, he was sweating, although he was wearing a thin suit.

An anxiety had formed in his mind. They had made their arrangements in the tension of the airfield when Laura's face was turned towards the rumble of the invisible aircraft in the lightening sky. Had she heard the time correctly? Did she know that "today" was today? Or had he said "tomorrow"? Today, tomorrow, tomorrow, today. The words became meaningless in his mind till the certainty returned that within an hour he would have met Laura again, within two hours, after all the self-hatred, the poisoning memories of his dead wife and her lover, the squalid succession of mistresses—the litany of their names came into his thought—he was going at last to reach a term to his lonely years, the threshold of a new beginning.

At the corner of the Square, he telephoned to his flat to see if there was a message from Laura.

"Any messages?" he asked his housekeeper.

"A Mrs. Metcalfe rang," she replied.

He kicked the heavy door and held it slightly open with his toe so that the stale tobacco-stench inside might be driven away by the fresh air.

"What did she have to say?" he asked in an unfamiliar voice. His heart had begun to beat faster, and he felt a strange, dragging sensation on one side of his face.

"She said I was to let you know she can't come. . . ."

"I see," said Russell. His heart was beating violently now, but his voice was steady. "Anything else?"

"Yes. She said could you meet her at twelve at the statue in Kensington Gardens."

"Did she say anything more?"

"No, nothing—Mr. Pawley rang too, and the builder wants to know——"

"Never mind now, Mrs. Topliss," said Russell. "We can leave that till later. Thank you very much for the message."

He pushed the door wide open with his shoulder, and shut his eyes as he leaned against it. A nausea had suddenly risen inside him, and he held his handkerchief to his mouth. When the sickness was past, he opened his eyes at the brilliant sun and the thronging traffic, then lowered his head again. Mrs. Metcalfe couldn't come. He wasn't angry. He thought of Laura's face with tenderness and regret. But Mrs. Metcalfe couldn't come and would never come. Mrs. Metcalfe's daydream had dissolved at the rough touch of reality. Oh, yes—Mrs. Metcalfe had intended to come. She'd planned to come. But Mrs. Metcalfe couldn't come for some reason that she would explain. Good-bye, Mrs. Metcalfe. Good-bye, Laura. A lump of despair had formed like a cancer in his entrails,

and provided itself with claws. "Laura!" he said to himself, "Laura!"

The tickets, his passport, the currency, the letters to the Lord Chancellor and the Chairman of his Association were bulky in his pockets. But Mrs. Metcalfe couldn't come and the tickets, the passport, the dollars and the francs——

"You here for the night, mate?" someone asked. Automatically, Russell apologised, and began to walk towards his car. He had purposed to garage it at Victoria, but had been concerned at leaving it there indefinitely. Not to have to do so was a relief. No problem of garaging the car, no letters to the Lord Chancellor and Harrison, no fear of pursuit, nothing. And thinking of the nothing that confronted him Russell felt his eyes prickling with misery.

Beyond the dark alley of chestnut trees, he saw Laura standing by the statue of the horseman, and he quickened his step. She had her back to him, and was leaning with her hand under her chin on the stone plinth against which a small girl was bouncing a ball.

"Hello, Laura," he said when he came up to her. She turned towards him, and he saw that her face was swollen with weeping, her pale cheeks blotched, her eyelids puffed and her hair wispy over her forehead.

"Oh, darling," she said, and for a few moments laid her face on his, her hands pressed against his arms.

He disengaged himself, and looked at her in silence till she said, "Let's walk down to the river. Please, Stephen. There are too many people here."

She took his arm in the way that had become habitual

to them, and they walked slowly over the grass, past the drifts of green leaves, to the water-side. As they walked, he felt her fingers moving against his arm, and he waited for her to speak.

"Where would we have been now?" she asked.

"Nearly at Dover," he answered. "What happened, Laura?"

He drew two deck-chairs side by side, and they sat there together.

"What happened?" he asked again.

"It's Roger," she said.

"I imagined that was it," said Russell and he roughly withdrew his arm from her hand that still held it.

"It's not what you think," she said. "Something terrible has happened."

She stared towards the swans huddled against the reeds, and he waited for her to continue.

"It happened after you left. . . . You remember Roger stayed in the aeroplane."

"Well?"

"They got him out, and when he came with them to the waiting-room he was ill."

"That's a euphemism."

"No—no, Stephen. It's not. He was ill. He suddenly began to groan—holding his chest and then his arm—and then slumped down on the ground. They thought he was drunk, but he wasn't. Not drunk at all."

She began to cry quietly, and a lacework of tears formed over her cheeks. "They got a doctor—and they put him into the bed in the first-aid room. And he was moaning with pain, and his face was like—like lime. Then the doctor gave him an injection and told me he was very seriously ill. He'd had a coronary thrombosis.

Russell took her hand in his, and said, "I'm sorry—terribly sorry, my darling. I wish I hadn't left so quickly."

He looked at her face expecting to see the gentle glance of recognition and gratitude that she had been accustomed to give in reply to his tendernesses, but instead, she was gazing straight ahead as if he were not there. She was absorbed in her own evocation.

"What happened then?" he asked sharply.

She slowly brought her eyes back to his, and said, "I waited till the morphia worked. It took a long time, and he was in awful pain. But when it started to work, somehow his expression changed. It was as if it gradually wiped away all the lines of anxiety and pain—all the suffering that Roger's had for so many years—and he looked innocent—translated."

Russell nodded his head. "Morphia always has that effect," he said.

"Oh, but it was more than that," said Laura. "I was sitting by the side of the bed, and he looked up at me, and said—I've never, never heard him speak like that before—he said, 'Please forgive me, Laura. I'm so sorry about all this.'"

Russell rose to his feet, and looked down at Laura. "And then?" he asked.

"Then he—"

"No. I'm not asking about him. I'm asking you about us."

She rose to her feet in turn, and tried to take his arm, but he withdrew a pace.

"No, Laura," he said. "Let me have it straight. I can face certainty, even if it's ugly. It's uncertainty that's painful. . . . You've decided to go back to him!"

"It's not that. I——"

He took her wrists in his hands, and held them tightly. "I want to know," he said, "Yes or no. Have you decided to stay with him?"

"For the time being——" she looked at him challengingly. "Yes!"

He let go of her hands, and said, "Very well, Laura. Let's walk down to Bayswater Road, and I'll get you a taxi."

They walked a foot apart from each other towards the fountains. Neither spoke till Laura said. "Don't misunderstand me, my darling. I love you very much."

"Rubbish!" said Russell.

"Oh, yes I do. But what would you have thought of me if I were to abandon Roger—and the children—at this moment when he's not only in trouble but desperately—desperately ill?"

Russell shrugged his shoulders, and paused to look at the chrysanthemums assembled in bronze clusters along the border of the path.

"They're elegiac," said Laura.

"Yes," said Russell, and they walked on. When she took his arm, he didn't withdraw it. They walked in slow time like mourners, their faces to the ground.

"There's something," said Laura, "that I've always wanted to tell you—but I've never been brave enough."

"Well?" said Russell, stopping.

A nursemaid with two children forced her perambulator between them, and Russell waited for Laura to approach him again.

"It's something to do with Roger and myself that I've never told you."

"It doesn't matter any longer," said Russell, but the cancer tightened its grip. "You mean that you and he——"

"No, not that. I almost told you the truth about that. Not that, Stephen. It happened years ago—during the war. For a very short time—with Marlow."

"Marlow!" said Russell. And it was like an infidelity towards himself.

"Yes, I must tell you. I want you to know everything now. It happened—and it was over—when Roger was away. But he got to know. He never knew it was Marlow, but he knew there was someone. And he was bitterly, unendingly unhappy. . . ."

She looked at Russell, and caressed his anguished face. "So much of everything—his violence, his drinking—everything had something to do with—"

"I see," said Russell. But her lie about Marlow when they had met at the tennis-club seemed remote and irrelevant. She had become not a stranger but a new person who looked like Laura and yet was not Laura entirely—a copy of Laura's image in which the colour, the light and even the forms resembled her but at second-hand, a version that was recognisable but at the same time inferior. It was like the ending of a book. Castelnau-les-Fleurs, Madame Nodier—dead; the island, their hopes all gone.

"I'm sorry, Stephen," she said, "So infinitely sorry to have done this to you."

"Never mind," he said. "It doesn't matter any more. . . . But you should have told me."

The ideal is the enemy of the real: he could hear Madame Nodier's voice in his mind.

He put his arm around her waist, and she her arm around his, and they continued their walk between the fountains. A light breeze had begun to blow from the west, driving the spray in unexpected gusts over the

children who were playing hide-and-seek among the flower urns.

"I am greatly at fault," said Laura. "But I love you, Stephen. I really do. Only you, my darling, ever in my life. And that's the whole story—I swear it."

She clung to him, weeping and waiting for him to speak. He stroked her uncovered head, and said, "I understand, Laura. I understand everything."

She looked up at him with a hope in her eyes.

"It's all over, Laura—it's all finished." His voice was harsh and exact.

"Oh, no," she said. "No, Stephen. It can't be finished. It mustn't be finished. I love you, Stephen—much too much for it ever to be finished. . . . You've got your work, but I've got nothing. Everything I've ever done—it's all been in the hope of finding you and staying with you. You mustn't take yourself away from me—you can't."

"It's too late, Laura. Your husband is ill, and I'm sorry—genuinely and deeply sorry. I understand him better at this moment than ever before. You're right to stay with him, and to defend him. . . . But what do you want me to do—cuckold a sick man?"

"Please don't be unkind."

"Unkind—you won't face the truth. You have a sensitive conscience that you balm with the easy penance of admitting your guilt. . . . That's just it, Laura. You want penance the easy way. You want to atone for your sin and enjoy its pleasures."

"No, Stephen, you're being vindictive and cruel. Don't you remember—we once said we'd never talk to each other as other people do—never say cruel and bitter things to each other?"

"What time are you going back?" Russell asked abruptly. "Where is he?"

"They took him to the nursing-home—my sister's with him—I ought to go back as soon as possible. . . . I haven't been to bed, and I simply must change."

"In that case," said Russell, "I won't detain you."

He took her hands in his, and as he looked at her familiar face, the anguishing cramp changed into a vast longing.

"Good-bye, Laura," he said. "Good-bye, my dear sweet darling. I love you very much."

She raised his right hand to her mouth and kissed his fingers and said. "We will see each other again—soon?"

Russell lowered his face and said, "No."

"Please, Stephen—please. This is only an interruption. It doesn't affect the reality—it doesn't affect our love."

"It does," said Russell. "The measure of love is what one will give up for it."

They had reached the gates of the park, and the sounds of the children at play had already been absorbed in the rumour of traffic.

"Good-bye, Laura."

"I can't cry any more," said Laura. "I've exhausted my tears. Oh, Stephen. Darling Stephen—please see me again. Once—on the steps of the Royal Academy—on my birthday. It's in your diary. You promised."

Russell raised his eyes to hers, hesitated, and she repeated, "You promised."

"No," said Russell. "It's all over."

And so they left each other. And twice as they went, they turned to wave.

